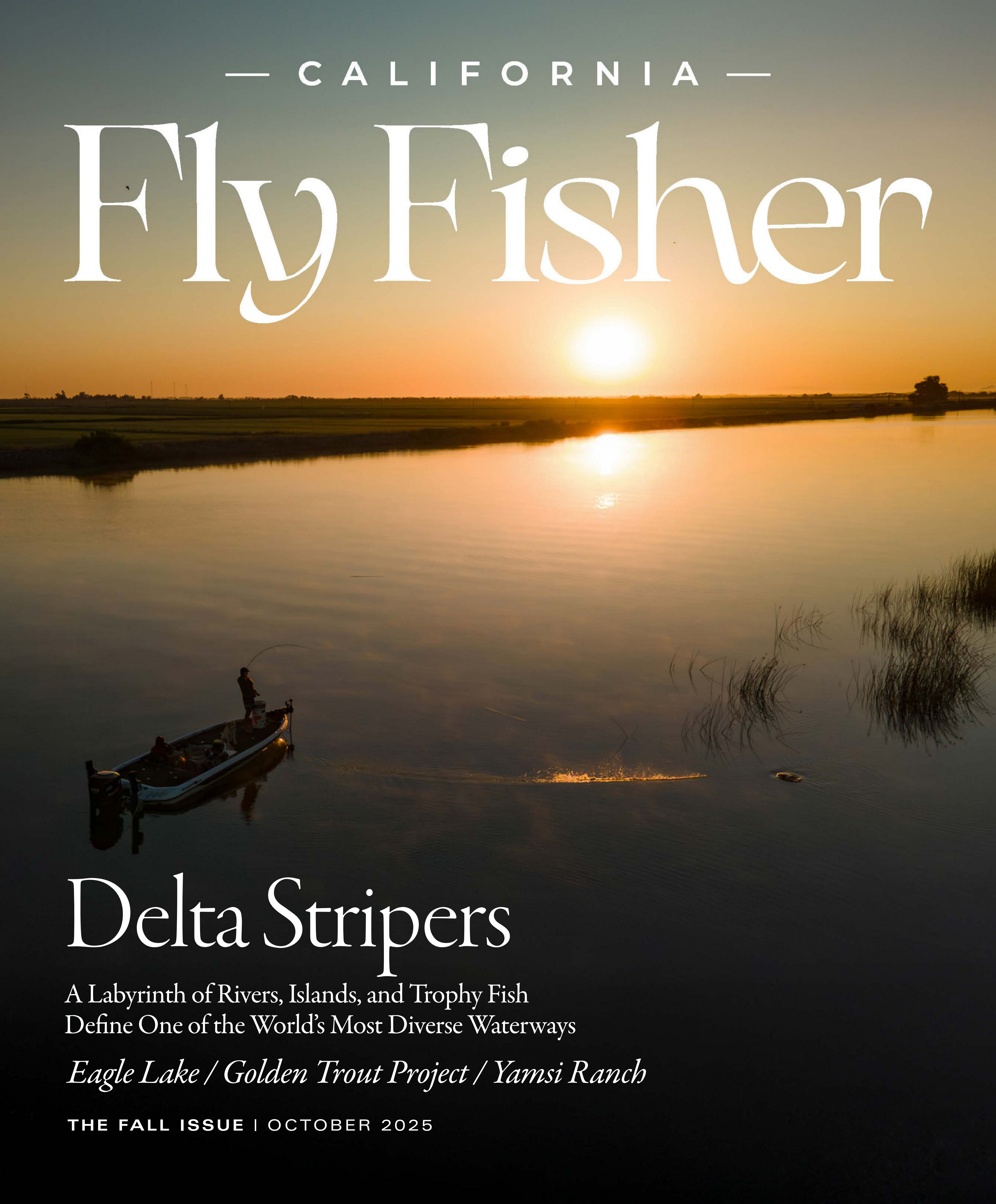

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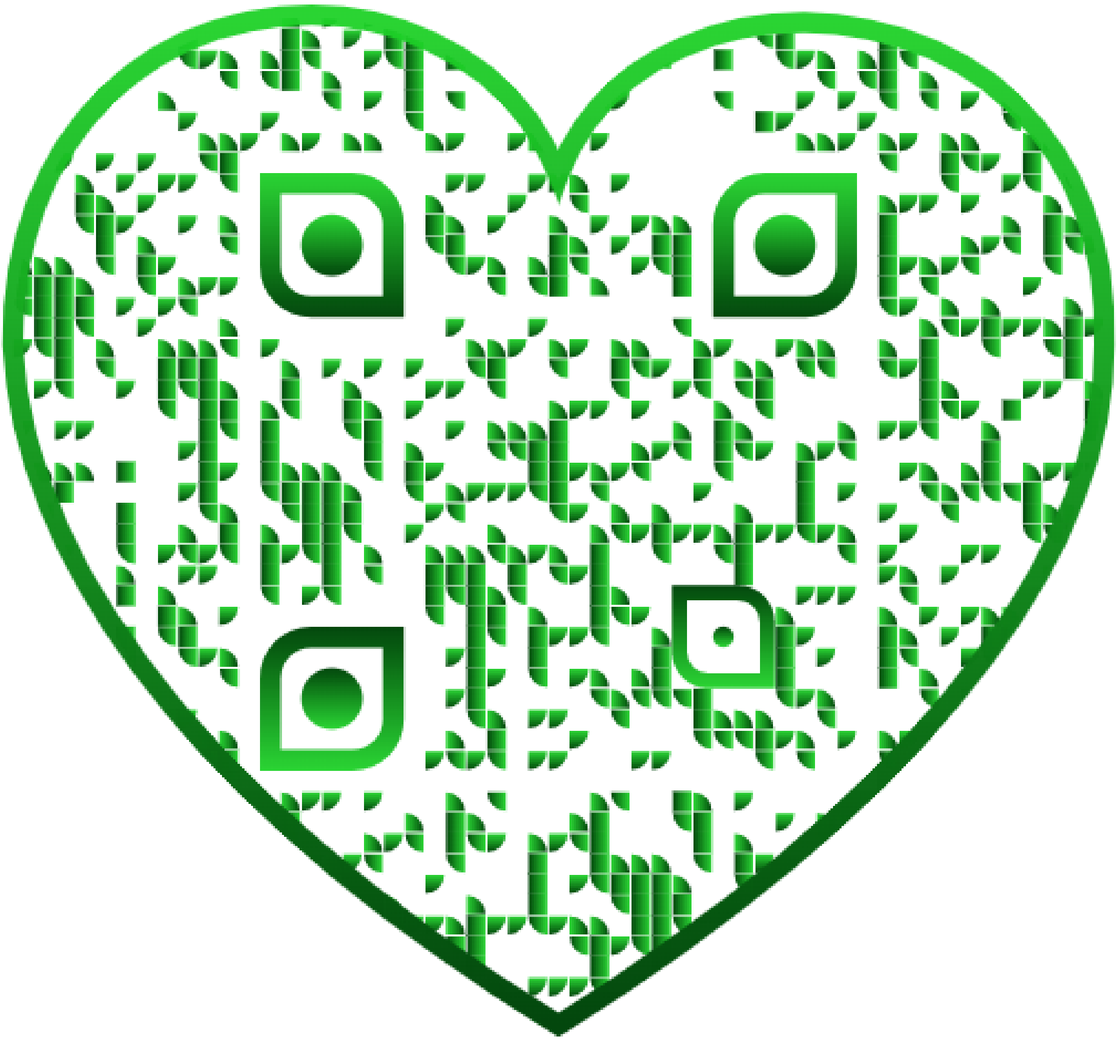

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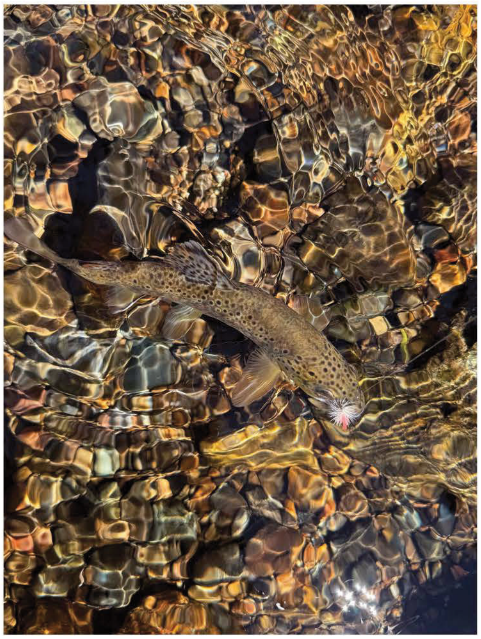


[Top] Tracey's first Delta striper with Captain Mike Costello. Photo by Sydnie Kohara [Bottom] A Dana Creek brookie caught while on GGACC's Learn to Fly Fish Yosemite outting. Photo by Tracey Diaz

A LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

There's a first time for everything.

Last month, I chased stripers on the California Delta for the very first time. Captain Mike Costello—our Spotlight Destination author and guide—and my friend Sydnie Kohara, a skilled Delta angler, were my companions. After weeks of poring over articles, maps, and images for this Fall issue, taking a real-world "test-drive" of the Delta didn't disappoint. The day was flawless, the company outstanding, and I even brought a couple of keepers to hand. Thank you, Mike and Sydnie, for an unforgettable day on the water.

More firsts are ahead for *California Fly Fisher.* On October 21, we'll host our inaugural webinar—a roundtable discussion that brings this issue's Delta stories to life. Join us as we talk striped bass tactics, the Delta's unique geology, and everyone's favorite striper fly, the Adachi Clouser. (See page 6 for details on how to tune in.)

We're also debuting our first online Gift Guide, brimming with thoughtful suggestions from our editorial contributors and committee members. Whether you're shopping for the angler in your life—or curating your own wish list—you'll find inspired picks perfect for the holidays or any season. See page 52 for more information and visit CalFlyFisher.com/Gift-Guide-2025 for the full online guide.

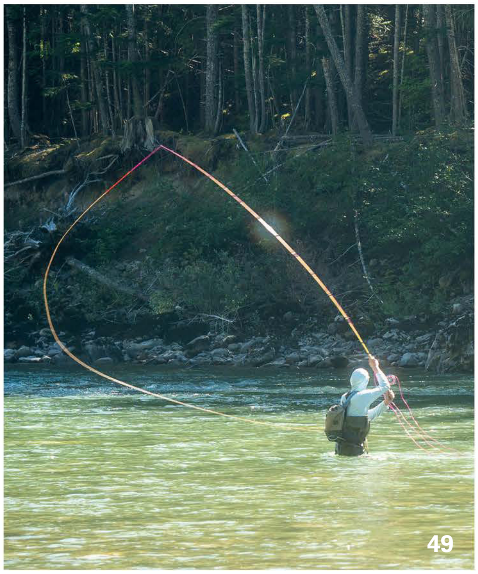
This Fall issue is rich with ideas and insight: Putah Creek's storied waters, an intimate look at Southern California guide Conway Bowman and his mako shark pursuits, Yamsi Ranch on Oregon's Williamson River, steelhead swing tips from George Revel, and meadow restoration benefitting our state fish through Trout Unlimited's Golden Trout Project.

I hope you, too, find a "first" to savor this season—on the Delta or on your own favorite water.

Tight lines,

Tracey

Tracey Diaz



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Tight lines at sunrise on the Delta. Photo by John Sherman

Photo: Scott Morrison

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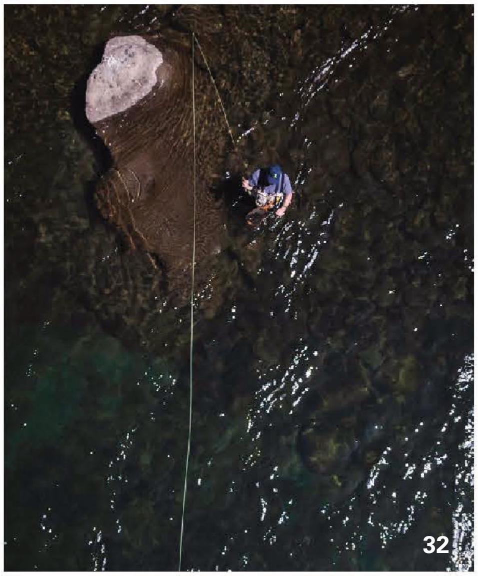

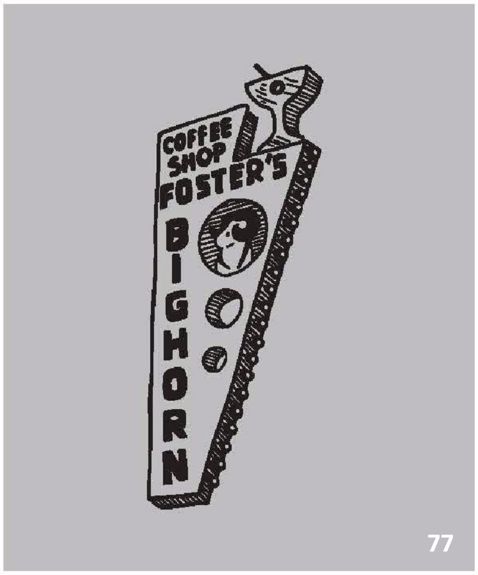

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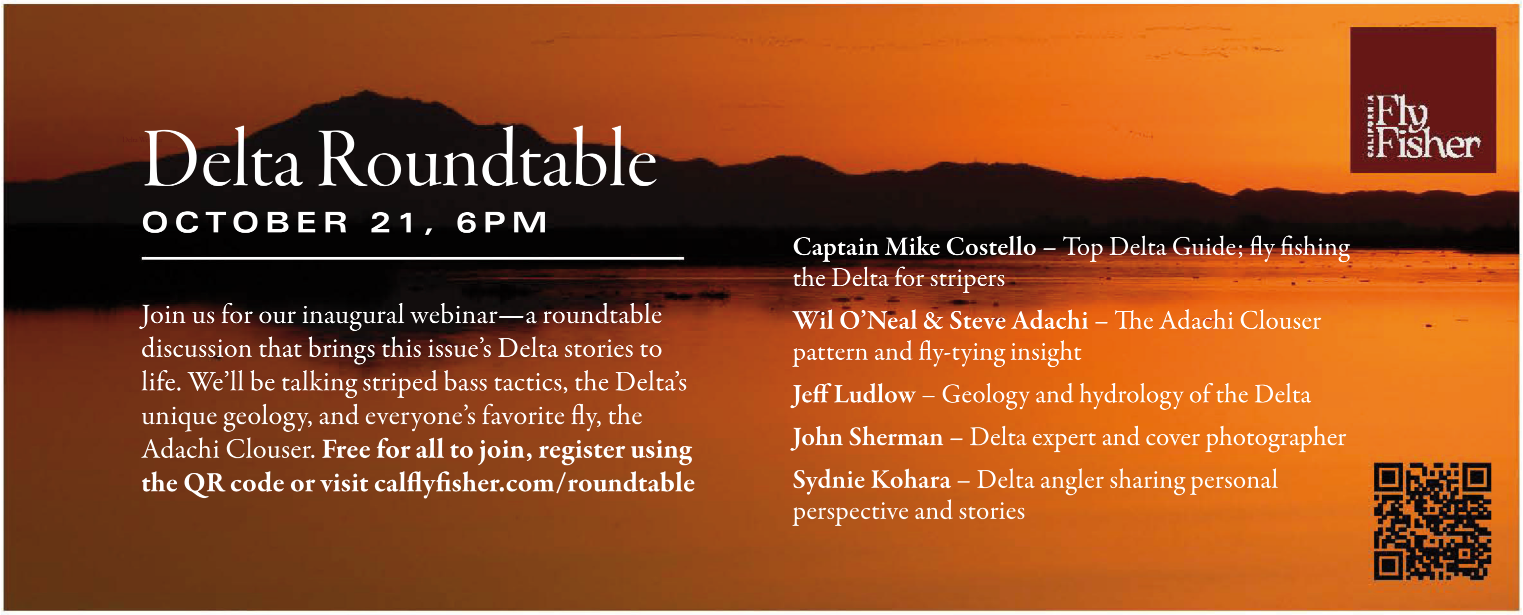

Delta Roundtable
OCTOBER 21, 6PM

Join us for our inaugural webinar—a roundtable discussion that brings this issue's Delta stories to life. We'll be talking striped bass tactics, the Delta's unique geology, and everyone's favorite fly, the Adachi Clouser. **Free for all to join, register using the QR code or visit calflyfisher.com/roundtable**

Captain Mike Costello – Top Delta Guide; fly fishing the Delta for stripers

Wil O'Neal & Steve Adachi – The Adachi Clouser pattern and fly-tying insight

Jeff Ludlow – Geology and hydrology of the Delta

John Sherman – Delta expert and cover photographer

Sydnie Kohara – Delta angler sharing personal perspective and stories

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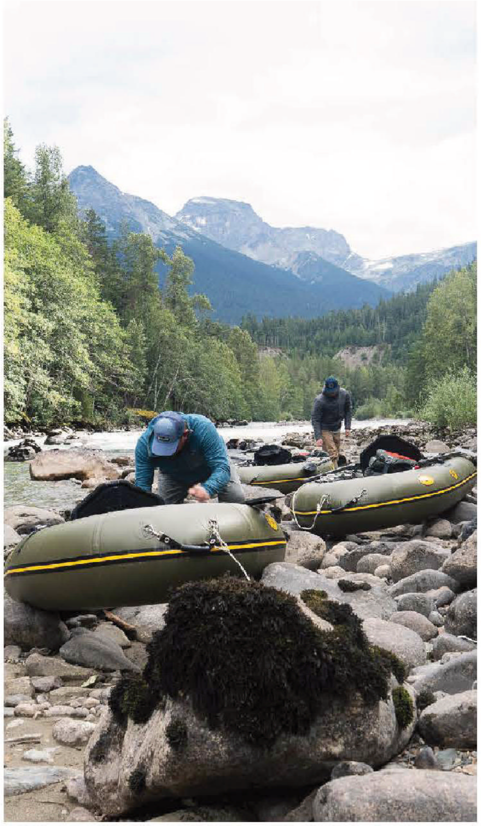


[Top] Fishing the San Francisco Ocean Beach surf wtih trusty sidekick, Remi. Photo by Val Atkinson
[Bottom] Getting boats ready for the day's Dean River float. Photo by George Revel

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I wonder how those not tethered to the seasons mark the passage of time, perhaps by holidays alone or the start and end of sporting seasons. But for anglers, hunters, and birders, each season carries its own pulse—its own signature of opportunities—woven with experiences from years gone by. With every issue of California Fly Fisher, we aim to honor those rhythms, to look back with gratitude and forward with anticipation.

This summer, mine was measured by the tug of stripers from the beach and the clarity of spring creeks near Shasta. I am not one to count fish, but instead count the time spent on the water as the achievement. Yet there are holes in every summer's tapestry: the backpacking trip that never was, the mountains not yet wandered. Those will have to wait for next year.

My high point came far afield, deep in British Columbia, where the roads end and the steelhead begin. It is a place of chanterelles rising after each rain, and wild cranberries plucked from the riverbank. The trip began under the shadow of atmospheric rivers. One evening, drifting downriver toward camp, my brother and I paused at a run too good to pass. I carried a dry line, he a sink tip. I fished first; he followed. In the next hour, over a dozen steelhead tore into our flies—the finest stretch of fishing I have ever known. For four more days, the dry fly outshone the sinking line three to one, mornings and evenings alike. And to think—people canceled their trips on account of a little atmospheric river.

Now autumn calls. October caddis on the McCloud, thrown with a bamboo rod. Warm October evenings in the Bay stripping Adachi Clousers for striper underneath a backlit Golden Gate Bridge. Cold November dawns on the Delta, with striper prowling. And still, the dream that pulls at me most—the pursuit of the great king salmon of the Smith River. For it is always the elusive that stirs our imaginations, and keeps us returning to the water.

Stay Fishy, California,

George

George Revel

East Fork Carson River, CA | David Dines

Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it.

In California's High Sierra, Western Rivers Conservancy is working to conserve Park Ranch and its 1.6 miles of the East Fork Carson River. Lahontan cutthroat share these waters with other native fish and nonnative rainbow and brown trout. WRC is working to buy the ranch and convey it to Alpine County to protect this exceptional stretch of river, mitigate wildfire risk, and create new recreational access for anglers, hunters, hikers, and others.

We count on support from people like you, anglers who know the value of clean water, healthy rivers and public access. Help us do more on rivers like the East Fork Carson, Fall, Saint Joe, Deschutes, and Rio Grande by visiting **westernrivers.org**.

WESTERN RIVERS
CONSERVANCY

CALIFORNIA Fly Fisher

CONTRIBUTORS

In This Issue

Mike Costello

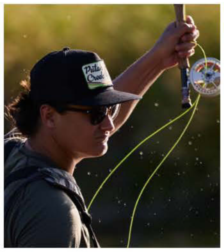
Captain Mike resides in Woodbridge, and has been a full-time fly-fishing guide for over 36 years, specializing in fly fishing the California Delta, as well as guiding clients on the Lower Sacramento and the Mokelumne River. Mike is also the author of two books, *Fly Fishing the California Delta* and the children's book, *Where A Trout Calls Home.*

George Croton

George is an attorney in the Bay Area. He specializes in water quality law and environmental regulatory compliance. He lives in Sonoma with his wife, two dogs, and two cats and enjoys fishing everywhere from muddy sloughs to alpine lakes. He contributes "The History of the Striper" to this issue.

Erik Duisenberg

Erik is a native Californian who grew up exploring the mountains, lakes, & streams of the area. Often told he looks smarter in pictures and that he's impossible to underestimate, he makes up for his dearth of talent with overwhelming enthusiasm. If he's not out fishing or skiing, you can probably find him at home, working through the directions on the shampoo bottle.



Johnny Feaster

Based in Winters, Johnny Feaster is a trusted local guide on Putah Creek and Lake Berryessa. A teacher at heart, he takes pride in helping anglers, from first-timers to seasoned pros, master new techniques. With Johnny, you'll leave the water with confidence, lasting skills, and a true love for fly fishing.

Joe Garza

Joe is an Orvis-endorsed guide born and raised in Northern California. He specializes in stillwater fly fishing on Lake Almanor and Eagle Lake. He also specializes in tailwaters in the Central Valley. Joe has a profound love of fly fishing. He is dedicated to teaching proper techniques, etiquette, and environmental stewardship.

Lance Gray

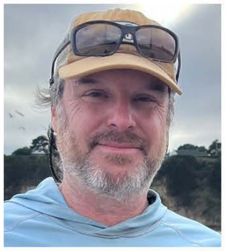
Lance and his wife Kirsten own Lance Gray & Company, a full-service outfitter offering guided trips, fly-fishing tours, and workshops.. Lance is a signature tyer for Aqua Flies, and a pro staff member for Sage, RIO, Simms, Fishpond, and Umpqua Feather Merchants.

Wil O'Neal

A self-proclaimed "flats bum," Wil is equally at home chasing salmon from his Grady White, *Feeling Lucky*, or stalking permit in Belize. When not fishing or hosting fly-fishing trips, he handles marketing for Golden State Salmon Association and helps out at Lost Coast Outfitters.

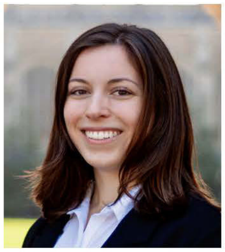
Al Quattrocchi

Al is a lifelong saltwater fly angler, educator, and environmental advocate. He holds two IGFA world records, co-founded many SoCal fly events, and teaches casting worldwide. Al is *Tail Magazine's* West Coast editor, West Coast Ambassador to the American Museum of Flyfishing, and author of *The Corbina Diaries*. He lives in Los Angeles.



Sam Silverstein

Sam is a self-taught fly fisherman and proud owner of a new wading staff. When not copyediting *California Fly Fisher*, he can be found at the kitchen table helping his wife Lisa Tabb operate ScreenagersMovie.com.



Sabrina Sugg

Sabrina is a graduate student at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor pursuing an MS through the School for Environment and Sustainability. Outside of class, she works at the Detroit Zoo as an Amphibian Intern Zookeeper. Her interests lie at the intersection between environmental science and creative writing.

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PERFECT TIMING

I'm writing with deep gratitude—and in hopes of celebrating and amplifying the strength of California's fly fishing community. Your July issue reminded me just how special and vibrant this community truly is.

I especially loved the feature article "Forks of the Kern." July is my birthday month, and I found myself at my desk, reflecting on what I could do to mark the occasion. It's been a tough year here in Los Angeles, and a fly fishing trip sounded like the perfect reset. Montana? Too crowded. Wyoming? Too expensive.

Then your magazine arrived.

I flipped it open and landed on Tim Huckaby's piece about the Forks of the Kern—one of my favorite places, though not exactly toddler-friendly with a two-year-old in tow. But tucked within the article was an ad for Peppermint Falls Ranch. I called them immediately. Not only could they accommodate my family for a long weekend, but they even reached out to Tim, who graciously agreed to guide me and a friend for a day on the water.

That weekend, my family and friends shared an experience that felt uniquely Californian: catching heritage trout in their native waters, exploring mule trails, discovering Indian kitchens and old rancher cabins. California is unmatched in its natural beauty and layered history—from the First Peoples who settled coastal islands to the missionaries and 49ers, and now to the anglers and conservationists who carry the story forward.

I felt that history not just intellectually, but viscerally, as I released a wild Kern River rainbow back into her home waters.

In a time when the California spirit has taken some hits, moments like these remind me of what's worth preserving. When Utah Congressman Mike Lee suggested selling off the very public lands where I had just been casting, it was Californians who pushed back—fiercely and vocally—to defend what's ours.

This magazine weaves together the many voices safeguarding California's waters—from CalTrout reviving native steelhead, to Lino Jimenez reintroducing Angelenos to the L.A. River, to Peppermint Falls Ranch preserving our frontier spirit.

As a proud Californian and a newly obsessed fly fisher, I'm profoundly grateful for this publication—and for the community it helps me feel a part of.

Chris Kirby
Los Angeles, CA

CASTING CLUBS

I received my edition of *California Fly Fisher* magazine in the mail today. I also just finished reading the article, "Casting Clubs of Northern California," by Jim Burke.

Wow.

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I believe that he captures the real essence of becoming a member of a Bay Area club and community. I have had the very fortunate experience of being a member of the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club in San Francisco for about two years. I loved Mr. Burke's description of a conversation among the past, present, and future. The history of the place is palpable and lingers in an always-present lesson to be acknowledged and appreciated. As he suggests, when visiting the ponds, worries recede.

Thank you, Jim Burke, for a beautiful depiction of the casting club and the people, its members, who form a special community.

Troy Lambson
Hillsborough, CA

I LIKE WHAT YOU'RE DOING

First, you have a fine, classy magazine. Thank you.

When I received my first copy, I was very impressed and continue to be so—I enjoyed the previous format of the magazine for content, but you have added a quality and style that really makes one notice the sport.

So, per your comments in the "Letter from the Publisher," I am letting you know I like what you are doing. My friends, too, are impressed with the quality of the publication and have great hopes that you will continue to keep the publication going, while an electronic publication gets the word out, your presentation in the hard copy is my preference.

FYI, I fish the Klamath, mostly for half-pound steelhead in late summer, early fall. With dam removal we lost last season, as the turbidity of the water was so bad that our group, which consists of nine to 25 fly fishers, caught only three steelhead last year. They were there, but we could not see our flies. When it's good, we can have 25 to 40 fish evenings or mornings. Admittedly, the water was so turbid that upon seeing the river, many did not cast a line. This year, the water was clear enough a month ago; we will see in late August when the fish begin to show, how it will fish, and if we can run our jet boats up the river in October, it will be interesting. With the effort to remove Scott and Cape Horn Dams on the Eel in the coming future, stories about the Klamath a year post-dam removal, and the prospects for removal of the Eel River dams could be interesting stories.

Heading up to the Trinity on Friday, I hope to hear about an early salmon run, or maybe just a few nice trout in the catch-and-release area below the Trinity Lake dam, and I have a visit with Herb Burton at the Trinity Fly Shop.

Thanks for what you do.

Frank Briceno
Santa Rosa, CA

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HAPPENINGS

Events

INTERNATIONAL FLY FISHING FILM FESTIVAL - GLENDALE

Thursday, October 9, 7:00 p.m.

Join *California Fly Fisher* as they host a screening of IF4 featuring films showcasing the passion, lifestyle, and culture of fly fishing.

Lamaelle Theatre, Glendale
www.FlyFilmFest.com

CROSSWATERCREEK OUTFITTERS RIBBON-CUTTING

Wednesday, October 15, 4 p.m. – 6 p.m.

Drop by to say hello to the new fly shop on the block at this grand opening event.

CrossWaterCreek Outfitters, 3574 Mt. Diablo Blvd, Lafayette
CrossWaterCreek.com

FISHING THE BAY AREA

Wednesday, October 15, 5:30 p.m.

Local guide Johnny Feaster will discuss fishing Putah Creek and other spots within an hour of the Bay Area.

Lost Coast Outfitters, 540 Jackson Street, San Francisco
LostCoastOutfitters.com

PUTAH CREEK CLEANUP

Saturday, December 6

Mark you calendar and volunteer alongside local guide Johnny Feaster and others from the community for a cleanup day on Putah Creek. Full details coming soon.

Northern California Chapter, FFI
NCCFFI.org

STEELHEAD TOURNAMENT

December 11 – 14

12th annual Cast Hope tournament on the Trinity River. Sign up to support the organization's mission to positively impact kids and their mentors through fly-fishing and outdoor experiences.

Indian Creek Lodge, Douglas City
CastHope.org

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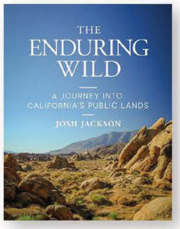


THE ENDURING WILD: A JOURNEY INTO CALIFORNIA'S PUBLIC LANDS
By Josh Jackson
Reviewed by Sean Stiny
$38, Heyday Books, 2025

BLM land. What the hell is it anyway? We all know it, it's your land and my land, managed by bureaucrats somewhere back in Washington (or Sacramento). Teddy Roosevelt and the Forest Service are mixed up in it. As is George Bird Grinnell. And certainly Aldo Leopold, the de facto current symbol of conservation. Hell, even old Ed Abbey. But how did it come about and what does it actually mean these days for you and me (and our fly rods)?

Author and custom furniture maker Josh Jackson set out to explore the land marked 'U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management' across California. What began with a map pinned to his wall showing all the BLM land in the state turned into his book, *The Enduring Wild*.

A noble undertaking when life was paused in 2020, he checked the dip stick in his family minivan and headed off to terrain on the California margins, as beautiful and wild and forgotten as it generally is.

Despite our best efforts and our commonplace notions of California, there are wild lands left for the exploring, and plenty of them. In a state bustling with highways and rebar and onlookers, his book, *The Enduring Wild*, unfurls land that has not be overrun and busted up.

First up is Rainbow Basin Natural Area, a small chunk of land in the Mojave Desert. As it turned out, quite empty, quite infertile, not the most stirring of BLM lands. Along with a sweat logged t-shirt, Jackson remarks "there was no wind, no birdsong, not even distant noise." Though he does note how he was "awe-struck by the sheer scale of barrenness."

As is often the case with BLM parcels (referred to early on as the "Bureau of Livestock and Mining"), they were forsaken as useless by surveyors and profiteers. "Too unattractive for the National Park Service, too bare for the Forest Service, and too lifeless for the Fish and Wildlife Service." Thus, the feds took them over, graded a few single tracks, scraped a few campsites, dug a few toilets, and called it unfouled land.

But that's sort of the point, isn't it? These aren't lands we've put on the highest pedestals like Joshua Tree or King's Canyon. Or on the single highest pedestal like Yosemite. But they are no less grand and breathtaking and worth conserving. Land where lonesome meets restorative. And they remind us that wild, true wild, is still out there and attainable, and isn't always filled to the gills with REI rubberneckers like a Bay Area freeway and not a half dome of granite.

In a subsequent chapter, the author sets out on a mule deer hunt with a friend. An avid outdoorsman but not an avid hunter, Jackson levels,

> *"I realized that hunters and anglers had their own forms of place attachment to nature and wildlife, and I was keen on broadening my experience."*

They don't take a muley with a bow, hell, they never even see one. But the pursuit provides him with yet another realization about the bond between us and the land.

Later, Jackson travels to the Elkhorn Ridge Wilderness in Mendocino County and camps along the South Fork of the Eel River with his father. This land, opposite the parched desert where he began, is green and damp and brimming. Black bears abound along with winter steelhead. This is dense forest and cold water within weekend distance from San Francisco. And further north is the Trinity and its wild and scenic steelhead. Lengths of it carve through BLM land as well, as do its silvers.

Included in Jackson's book are photos of these lands and illustrations of their flora and fauna (a creosote bush for example, a San Juaquin kit fox). The photos aren't glossy ones from a coffee table book, but real photos (taken by the author) of what you might see at each location. Even their matte finish makes them feel more authentic than, say, a sunset that the photographer waited five hours to capture.

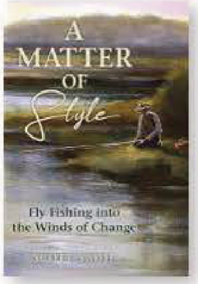
What his book is not, to much appreciation, is a meticulous year-by-year history of the Bureau of Land Management and the politicos who argue incessantly about boundaries and usage. There is an abundance of literature on just that. What it is, thankfully, is an exploration of BLM land right here in California, simply it's folded hills and teddy-bear cholla, its barred owls and pronghorn antelope.

Jackson began his multi-year quest with a BLM map "hanging in my living room like a beacon, serving as my starting point." He set out to document real experiences and observations in each location and to capture an authentic feeling for each swath of BLM land and why they are worth setting aside.

And each of us can have our own experiences on these public lands, because after all, we own 'em. All that's required is a couple jugs of water, a full tank of gas, and perhaps a Rand McNally road atlas. And a curiosity for the landscape, perhaps a slight thirst for adventure.

While Teddy declared "leave it as it is," Jackson declares "lands once overlooked and undervalued possess a profound strength and beauty worth fighting for."

For more information on author Josh Jackson and BLM-managed public lands visit: ForgottenLandsProject.com



A MATTER OF STYLE

By Scott Sadil

Reviewed by Sean Stiny

$24.95, Stackpole Books, 2025

Solitary is the fly fisher, even with fishing compadres just around the bend. Trying to work out a run or a bank or a deep hole, and its trout inhabitors.

More solitary is the fly-fishing writer, trying to spin a tale or a yarn or an escapade from memory. Constructing the lesson learned or plot foiled by a wizened old rainbow who couldn't be bothered to rise to any old parachute Adams.

Scott Sadil, fly tyer emeritus for *California Fly Fisher*, has collected a lifetime of these yarns and angling lessons, enough to fill his book, *A Matter of Style, Fly Fishing into the Winds of Change*. He gives up anecdotes on angling, doing things other than angling, and just plain wishing he were angling. Included are tales of busted rods, pain-in-the-ass boats (but not his Madrina), befuddled fishing buddies, and the cast and the mend and the repose of the river.

He pens: "You can do a lot worse in life, of course, than having a remote mountain stream loaded with eight to 12-inch trout all to yourself."

Accounts of the landscape in which he fishes are splendid, too. "The steep canyon walls rise crusty with blackened trees. Along the trail, tangles of snags and standing dead creak and moan with each faint breath of morning breeze."

Most angling writers seem to recount stories from memory, from time spent on the water or at the watering hole after the evening bite. But Sadil writes like he's fishing and writing at the same time, like he's jotting notes between casts. It's refreshing and a wee bit more tactile than most angling books. For instance, he notes:

"I tilt the rod and lift the nail knot and see in silhouette against the fading sky that, yep, sure enough, there's no longer a little wet caddis on one of the tag ends of my blood knot."

When he details shaping a wading staff out of a piece of leftover sapele (a beautifully tight-grained type of mahogany), well, he's speaking directly to me and my woodworking self. This is in response to the need for a wading staff now in his, let's say, mature years.

> *"There's a cost to every change. As the sun sets beyond the southern rim of the canyon, I sense a connection between changes ahead … and my begrudging willingness to accept a stick as a tool for hunting whitewater rainbows."*

The winds of change Sadil references are many. The dams (though a few have come down) and the destruction of habitat like the redwood forests along the Lost Coast of northern California.

Yet Sadil still fishes and travels the west and weighs his impact on the water and soil and salmonids. He's most appeased fishing for "redsides" (rainbows) or on *Madrina*, his "little beach yawl" in Baja for triggerfish and palometa, or whatever snapper or grouper is cruising for lunch.

In the eponymous story, *A Matter of Style*, Sadil recalls choosing the right fly for big browns in Patagonia. Browns as "big around as a sprinter's thigh."

Your flies, your Chernobyl Ants and homemade Woolly Buggers, your casting technique, your gear, your rod, your approach to the angling discipline. Are you loose or tense, persnickety or jovial, focused or aloof? It's all a matter of style. Even the right amount of buffoonery in the out of doors can be tolerable, amusing even. It's all copacetic as long as you respect the water and the trout and your fellow anglers.

A few of Sadil's stories elicit a 'better him than me,' but most evoke a 'damn, I wish I was there.' Sadil confides: "You fish long enough, you learn to tell yourself all sorts of stories, some of them truer than others. Then I come up tight on something heavy—and I'm pretty damn sure I've got another one to share."

So here's to more yarns and more fish, Scott. We're all the better anglers for them.

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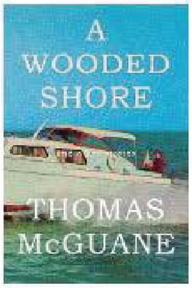


A WOODED SHORE
By Thomas McGuane
Reviewed by
Sean Stiny

$27, Penquin
Random House, 2025

Thomas McGuane's *The Longest Silence* might as well be the fly-fishing Bible. The New Testament anyway. It's passed down from angler-father to angler-son, is required reading before you reach angler maturity (around 65, I'd say).

He, too, is a master of short fiction. His characters are odd, his scenes peculiar, his prose winding. His latest is *A Wooded Shore*, a collection of nine short stories that fuse, well, odd characters in peculiar scenes.

It's a concise one, under 200 pages. In the eponymous story, Fred Latham and his family float about on a decrepit river yacht in a small tributary of an unnamed Great Lake. He and his inevitable ex-wife squabble with boaters, each other, lose a toddler bobbing downriver in a life jacket, and generally cavort and complain. Each of their lives goes downhill from there, and fast.

The characters are strange, their lives are stranger, and McGuane writes it all with clarity and tact. While not up there with *The Longest Silence* in both its fishing tales and inscrutable characters, you'll finish each story in *A Wooded Shore* with a resounding "good riddance to those poor bastards."

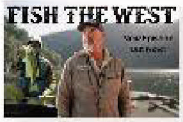
McGuane is the last of the Montana-in-summer, Key West-in-winter, fry up a woodcock, drink down a bottle of Côtes du Rhône then clear the deck for a shindig writers. He's on the Mt. Rushmore of angling writers alongside John Gierach, Nick Lyons, and Jim Harrison. High praise, sure, but McGuane is among the crème de la angler-writing crème.

And forget the fly rod literature for a moment, he's in fact amongst the outdoor greats alongside, dare I list them, Norman Maclean, Hemingway, and again, our beloved Jim Harrison. A more apt monument for them than Mt. Rushmore, their faces carved into boulders along the banks of the Madison.

Still fishing and writing, McGuane is the scribbler emeritus of fishing tales. Now, 85, there's no telling how many more tales we'll get out of him. Savor his words and his characters respectively, even when they make you blurt a "sweet Jesus" as you read 'em.

A new McGuane book should make every literary angler perk up, like a brown trout rising just beyond your Elk Hair Caddis. So, consider a slight sojourn from another thick-as-a-brick WWII book, and read a little Montana lit. It won't hurt none, might even be nice to read about some other lousy bastards for a change.

To Watch



FISH THE WEST FILMS
Director/Producer
Devan Homis
Host/Producer Guy
Jeans
Available on YouTube at
FishtheWestFilms.com

Fish the West Films delivers a fresh and authentic perspective on fly fishing in the American West. Guided by a passion for the sport and produced with cinematic care, the series highlights the people, places, and culture that make fly fishing more than just pastime—it's a way of life.

The debut episode, *The Still Water Visionary: Ryan Williams*, sets a high bar. In the clear waters of Lake Oroville, Williams demonstrates how creativity and persistence can transform stillwater bass fishing with a fly rod. His custom fly designs and innovative techniques showcase both the potential of untapped fisheries and the ingenuity that drives the sport forward.

Future episodes promise even more for California anglers, with appearances from *CAFF's* own George Revel, along with contributors Dagur Gudmundsson and Glenn Ueda. Their stories, alongside those of renowned anglers like Vaughn Podmore and Pat Jaeger, will broaden the series' reach while keeping the spotlight on the unique character of Western waters and those who fish them. *California Fly Fisher* is proud to be a partner in Season 1, helping bring these stories to the community we serve.

Fish the West Films is a thoughtful, well-crafted series that feels both personal and universal—rooted in the craft yet expansive in vision. For anyone passionate about fly fishing, it's a compelling watch.

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An Autumn to Remember

By Bill Barich

Autumn comes early to the mountains. You might catch a glimpse of it in late August when the aspens take on a hint of color. I love the crisp, clean autumn air, the falling leaves, the frosts that creep up and take you by surprise, and the sun as it warms you when you throw out your first hopeful cast. Today might be the day you hook a trophy.

Autumn's a nostalgic season, too. I think back over the trips I've made and feel a pang of regret I haven't made more. Instead of fishing, I've taken care of business, paid the bills and mortgage, painted the garden shed, and so on. It can be a little depressing as trout season draws to a close. I'm left hungry for more, and April is a long way off.

Only once did I spend a big chunk of my autumn fishing. Ernest Hemingway provided the inspiration. I read about a trip he made in 1916 with his pal Lewis Clarahan. They were teenagers, still in high school. For 11 days, they hiked and camped in northern Michigan, riding the rails through the pine forests south of Traverse City, the territory Hemingway recalled in his Nick Adams stories.

Their first stop was Bear Creek, where they set up their pup tent. In his pocket diary, Hemingway noted, "Camped in dandy spot on bank of stream. Many trout jumping. Killed water moccasin on R.R. tracks." They had wonderful luck on Bear Creek. Hemingway was impressed with the fighting spirit of the fish, landing an 18-inch brown he battled for 15 minutes. For supper, they ate trout rolled in cornmeal and fried in bacon grease.

They moved on to the Boardman River. still a first-class stream holding brookies, rainbows, and browns. Lew took off to fish a creek nearby, while Hemingway waded the river. It was wide and fairly deep with "a devilish current." They built a shelter of spruce for sleeping, but when it began raining at two a.m., the shelter leaked. The lads woke, dusted themselves off, and fished in the downpour. Lew caught two big rainbows that "fought nicely and broke water."

The whole trip went that way. All they did was hike, camp, and fish, splurging just once for dinner at a café in Walton Junction. They got a big kick out of mistaking two huge suckers they hooked for giant trout. They swapped the suckers with some "old folks" for a quart of fresh milk. The old woman smoked a pipe. "The Boardman is some river," Hemingway wrote appreciatively.

I got worked up reading the article. Lew and Ernest were fearless teenagers, and I was a not-so-fearless adult, but that shouldn't keep me from making a similar trip. The bills could wait, couldn't they? I wouldn't miss the bill-paying when I was gone, so I grabbed some guidebooks and Forest Service maps and left San Anselmo, where I lived at the time, in late September.

I'd chosen to start on the Middle Fork of the Tuolumne. It's known for its wild trout, but I'd never fished it before. I followed a route into the foothills of the Central Valley, where the river flows through Stanislaus National Forest. The Middle Fork sits deep in a canyon my guidebook described as "a bit difficult to reach." That was like saying, "Stephen Curry's pretty good at basketball," but I didn't find out until I passed through Groveland and reached the canyon rim.

This was no ordinary canyon. It was the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne, a wonder of geology. The sun, molten orange, cooked the rocks and soil to a fiery incandescence. At the very bottom, glittering like a piece of crumpled foil, I saw the Middle Fork. The road down was five miles of bad dirt and barely wide enough for a single car. I pictured myself veering off a cliff and tumbling four and a half miles to my demise. In a four-wheeler I'd have risked it, but not in a vintage Toyota wagon with two worn-out tires.

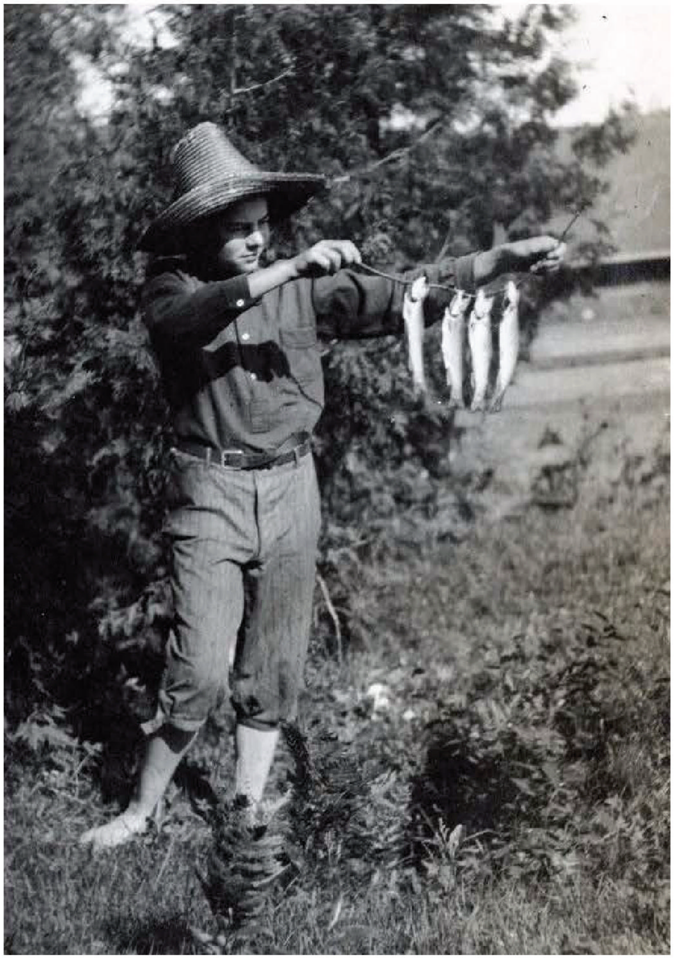
I kicked myself for turning back. Old and useless, no longer the intrepid angler I once was. What would Hemingway think? I tried not to think myself. I figured the Merced might restore my self-confidence and headed to Yosemite in the morning. The summer crowds would be gone, and I could access the river right off the road. Perfect for an old guy, really.

The Merced is deceptive in the autumn. It looks as if it's bone-dry, but if you climb over the boulders, you'll find deep pools hidden among them. The light will be intense and revealing, so you need to sneak up and cast with a minimum of fuss. I caught lots of small rainbows on a variety of nymphs —Hare's Ear, Gold Bead Princes, Zug Bugs —but nothing worth a selfie.

Maybe I'd do better on the Stanislaus. I followed Highway 108 through the Gold Country to Strawberry. The river looked ragged, badly logged over, and I got skunked that evening. You'll get lucky tomorrow, I told myself as I always do. But the weather turned wintry, and frost crunched beneath my boots as I walked to the stream. I could feel the frigid water through my waders.

To my surprise, a single mayfly took flight, fluttering regally. When a second solo flier appeared, I tied on an Adams and picked up a four-inch rainbow. Bad enough to catch a midget, but the little guy had mangled my fly, too! I fluffed up the hackles and cast to an undercut bank, where the little guy's great-grandfather attacked it. Down he dived into a tangled web of weeds, snapping off my leader.

My luck had gone sour, and I had no doubt it would stay that way. The fates were punishing me for neglecting my duties at home, so I reluctantly returned to San Anselmo. That was silly, of course. I could no



A young Ernest Hemingway spent his summers fishing the rivers of northern Michigan. Photos courtesy of Central Michigan University Clarke Historical Library.

more stop fishing than beat Stephen Curry in a game of one-on-one. Two days later, I packed up again and headed for Kings Canyon National Park, another spot I'd never visited before.

I must've been feeling brave, wilfully ignoring the word "canyon." I traveled through the dusty valley flats, where the cottonfields were in bloom, and climbed into the Sierra Nevada to the park entrance at about 8,000 feet. Cedar Grove was 30 miles or so away, a ranger told me. I could camp by the river there.

There'd be no turning back this time. Slowly I negotiated the road, two hands on the wheel, taking only brief glances at the massive glaciated terrain of the canyon. At Cedar Grove, I set up camp beneath the swelling granite formations of Grand Sentinel and North Dome, ancient rocks snoring away the centuries.

I was on the South Fork Kings. I'd heard that fly fishers routinely catch 20 to 25 trout in an evening, and I did the same. The October caddis came off in bunches and hit my Stimulator non-stop. I fished along the fringe of stunning meadows, where the willows were an autumn gold and the sedges a russet color. On the high mountain ridges, the aspens were like tongues of flame leaping out from a dark green tier of pines and firs.

The South Fork was sublime. I wished I could stay forever, but after three days, I forced myself to quit. Home again, I put away my gear for the season, and two weeks later, in early November with the weather still mild, I retrieved it and drove straight to Downieville for what would be—I promised myself—the last of my fishing for the year.

I checked into a motel on the North Yuba, where the Downie River flowed into it. I fell asleep to the sound of the rivers and slept hard and well. The mountain mornings were very cold, but I fished every day till dark, not only the North Fork but Pauley Creek, too, where I hooked a good brown. I waded in sneakers and shorts and fed myself from a knapsack, an apple or pear, a hunk of bread and cheese.

There were splinters of ice on the parking lot puddles when I finally had enough. The cold had put down the trout, and the first big storms of winter were on the horizon. At home, I stacked firewood on the front porch and cleaned out the gutters, took long hikes on Mount Tam and wondered how many days until trout season opened again.

Bill has written for *California Fly Fisher* for almost 10 years. To read some of his past articles, scan the code below.

CATCHY IDEAS

Making The Right Moves

By Robert Ketley

If you look at a natural setting, such as a meadow or forest, your attention will naturally be drawn toward things that move, like birds, squirrels, snakes, and mountain lions.

This trait helped our ancestors find food and stay alive. The same thing happens with fish; the way your fly moves may attract them or make them bolt for safety. This is especially true on heavily pressured waters, where the fish are more wary of anglers and their flies. So, how do you make the right moves?

LIFT TWITCH AND SWING

The easiest way to add some bite-inducing movement to a fly is to modify your retrieve. For example, experienced nymphers will often incorporate a Sawyer Lift or Leisenring Lift to activate their flies and induce takes. These moves can work like magic on California spring creeks and English chalk streams, both renowned for exceptionally wary trout.

While most dry flies are fished with a dead drift, skating caddis patterns across the surface, or giving terrestrial patterns a twitch, can often get a fussy fish to take your fly. And let's not forget the good old wet fly swing, which has been grabbing the attention of millions of fish for hundreds of years.

DANCING WITH STREAMERS

Streamer fishing is one of the most dynamic forms of fly fishing. Whether you are working the riverbank from a drift boat or covering a rip in the jostling surf, fishing streamers is a total blast. Many folks are content to use a steady retrieve, which gives the fly a consistent stop-start motion, but this is like playing one key on a piano. Learn how to work the fly using different retrieves and rod movements, and you'll unlock a variety of grab-inducing motions. I could go into detail, but Kelly Galloup has produced excellent online videos detailing how and when to use a variety of streamer retrieves.

MAKING THE MOVE

Manipulating the retrieve is the easiest way to enhance a fly's movement repertoire, but you are limited by the fly's physical aspects, such as materials, buoyancy, balance, and shape. For example, no matter how well it's tied, a Bead Head Nymph will never make a good leech pattern. Designing flies so they move in specific ways takes time and effort. This is why most tyers stick with well-known patterns, where someone else has done the R&D work. However, the rewards that come from such innovative efforts cannot be overstated. A fly that does something different opens up all kinds of opportunities (and fun) for the adventurous fly fisher.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a fly designed to move in a specific way is Bob Clouser's Deep Minnow. Bead-chain or lead eyes located at the front of the fly give it a pronounced front weight bias, producing a jig-like action when it is retrieved. This fly was originally designed for smallmouth bass but has become a fly box essential for countless freshwater and saltwater fly fishers.

Another innovative fly is Lee Haskin's Neutralizer, a neutrally buoyant pattern initially developed for tarpon. Many years back, Lee gave me a few prototypes to take to the Everglades. I was amazed how the fly sat perfectly level and still between pulls on the line. This is how many baitfish behave when they are not feeding or fleeing. The fly was a hit with snook and redfish and has landed plenty of California surf-zone stripers, too.

The Crease Fly is a topwater baitfish pattern developed by Joe Blados that uses folded sheet foam. A lesser-known version is the Upside-Down Crease Fly, created by Phil Lee. Unlike the original pattern, the upside-down version features a downward jutting lip that makes it wobble like a Rapala lure. It's easy to tie and, with silver or gold-coated foam, it sends out pulses of light the fish can see and a vibrato of pressure waves they can feel. Paired with an intermediate or sinking line, it gets the attention of fish from much farther away than typical baitfish patterns. When you are fishing for trout or stripers in waters measured in hundreds or thousands of acres, that extra reach can make a big difference.

Supple materials like marabou move freely, making them a good choice for still and slow water conditions. Fast currents tend to overwhelm and flatten these materials, which reduces their effectiveness.Photos by Robert Ketley

Lee Haskin's Neutralizer is a neutrally buoyant fly that sits still and level between pulls on the line. This mimics how many baitfish behave when they are unaware that a predator is nearby.

The Upside Down Crease Fly is easy to tie and moves like a Rapala lure, making it a great searching pattern for big waters.

TWO-STEP PROGRAM

Designing movement into your flies isn't particularly hard, so long as you understand that lifelike movement occurs at two levels: the way water moves the materials, and the movement of the fly through the water. How you approach these two design elements determines how the fly performs.

FLOW RATES

One factor affecting fly movement is whether the water itself is moving. Materials that work well in fast rivers can be almost lifeless in stillwaters. For example, bucktail and some synthetic fibers barely move in lakes and ponds. Conversely, fast-moving water will often flatten out soft, supple materials like marabou.

Water speed also influences how the fly moves through the water. Faster water (or a faster retrieve) increases the forces acting on the fly. A relatively symmetrical fly, like a Deceiver, will generally move in a direct path, regardless of the current or retrieve speed. In contrast, an asymmetrical pattern, such as the Wobble Fly, creates turbulence that makes it wiggle. However, it is important to note that asymmetrical flies often have a performance window. An overly fast retrieve can cause the fly to spin in the water, and too much asymmetry will make them helicopter on the cast.

BALANCE

Watch underwater videos of streamers being retrieved, and you'll notice many of them move up on the pull and down on the pause. Flies that have weighted heads or use heavy, short-shank hooks will move in this distinctly sawtooth way. This motion suggests injured prey, which can be a feeding trigger. But there are times when this does not appeal to fish, either because they have learned to avoid flies that move this way, or they are selectively feeding on prey that swims more linearly. You can reduce the sawtooth motion by moving the center of mass towards the middle of the fly. In some cases, all you need is a lighter hook. Long-shank hooks can also help.

The reverse situation applies to tube flies. A heavy hook can give the fly a "crippled seahorse" action. This could be perfect for fly fishing tropical reefs, but it doesn't make much sense on a steelhead stream. A lighter hook will help reduce or eliminate this effect.

BUOYANCY

Sometimes, especially in stillwater and saltwater, the fish want a fly that barely floats, is neutrally buoyant, or sinks slowly. For example, trout and stripers feeding on schools of baitfish will often slash through the school. A number of baitfish end up injured or dead but not eaten. The predators will return to consume them as they slowly sink or rise through the water. Under these circumstances, a normally retrieved fly will often be ignored.

This is where the combination of an intermediate line and a neutral buoyancy fly can make for some fascinating fishing. The intermediate line will slowly pull the fly down through the water column. The fish aren't expecting the prey to escape, so their attack is usually measured and deliberate. A slow tightening of the line may be the first indication a fish has taken your fly. Don't let this soft touch fool you. A few years back, a friend (who we shall call David) noticed a subtle change in line tension seconds before a 24-inch rainbow hit the afterburners. It took half an hour for the poor guy to calm down.

If the fish are taking dead or dying baitfish on the surface (due to swim bladder damage), a fly that barely floats will closely match the natural. This is the streamer equivalent of fishing an emerger pattern in the surface film. Most of the time, you cast in the general direction of feeding fish, give the fly the occasional twitch, and wait for a fish to find it. However, an observant angler can often predict the path of an individual fish. You cast about six to 10 feet ahead of the fish and focus like a laser on the dimple created by the fly. As the fish nears, you wonder, “Should I twitch it one more time”? The anticipation is often so intense that you forget to breathe.

A fly that barely floats can also be useful when fishing along the bottom. The combination of a slightly buoyant fly, a short (3 feet) leader, and a fast sink line allows the fly to skim just above the bottom. Crayfish, dragonfly nymph, leech, and baitfish patterns fished just off the bottom have proven to be deadly on brown trout, largemouth bass, and halibut. One of the most brutal grabs I have ever experienced was when a largemouth took a buoyant crayfish pattern. The take was so hard, I felt it drive the soles of my feet into the boat deck.

Perhaps the simplest way to tie flies with different levels of buoyancy is to use closed-cell foam. Before you start tying, spear some foam onto the hook, and drop it into a glass of water. It’s best to add just a bit too much foam and snip off any excess once the fly is completed. Lightweight hooks can significantly reduce the amount of foam you’ll need, which helps with less bulky patterns.

SHAPE

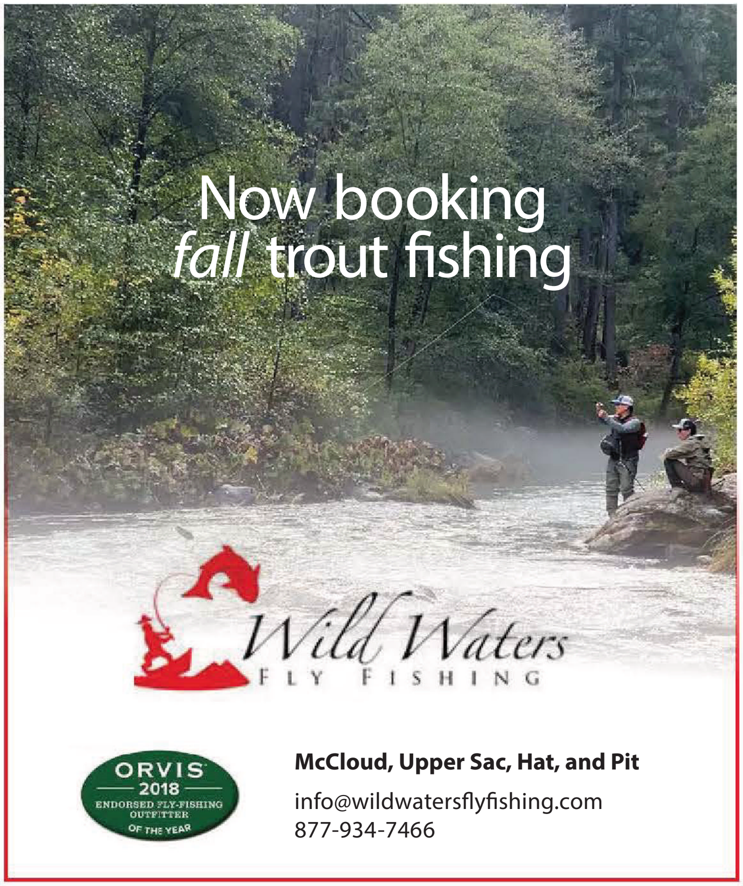
As briefly discussed above, the shape of the fly determines how it moves through the water. This is easier to understand when we look at the lures many conventional bass anglers use. Short, flat-sided crankbaits generally produce a tight wiggle when retrieved, while longer banana-shaped lures will have a wider wiggle. Swimbaits feature a paddle or curly tail that produces a serpentine swimming motion.

By mimicking these shapes, you can produce flies with similar actions. The Upside-Down Crease Fly and the Wobble Fly are both excellent examples of flies that wiggle when retrieved. Incorporating a fly tail or paddle tail into a streamer is an easy way to get a lifelike swimming action.

PATIENCE

Perhaps the main problem with developing new flies is that you seldom get things right on the first try. The more radical the design, the more likely you are to have teething problems. Don’t be surprised if it takes an hour or two at the vise and a couple of trips to the water to iron out any bugs. That said, don’t be too quick to eliminate “failed” flies; if they do something very different, they just might be the basis for a radically new pattern.

There are very few things in fly fishing that are as cool and rewarding as developing a fly with the right moves. Do not deny yourself that pleasure.



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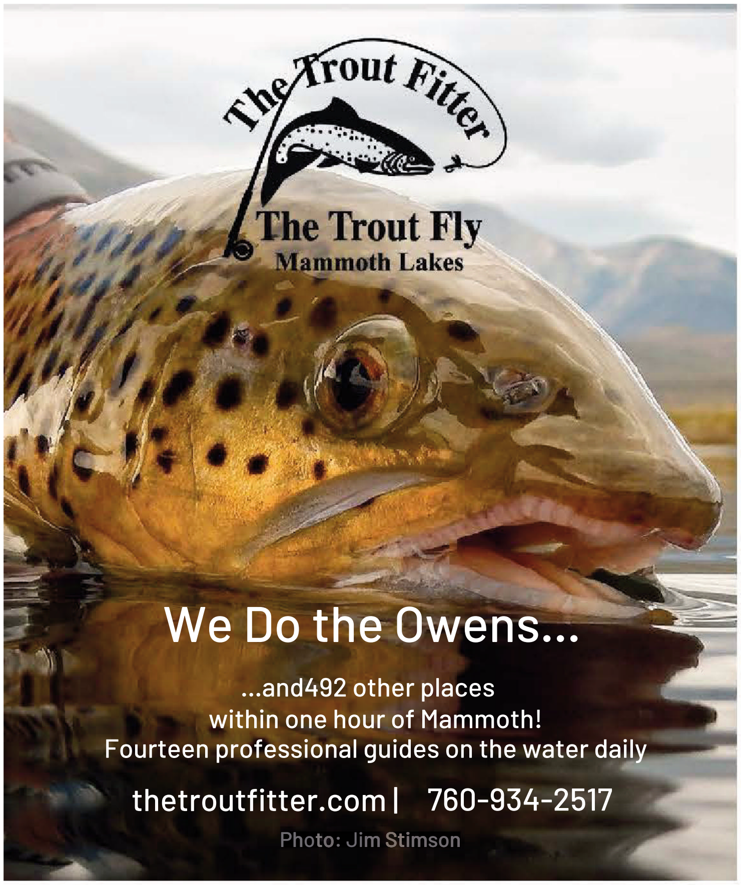

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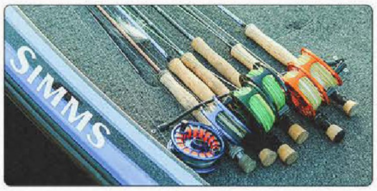

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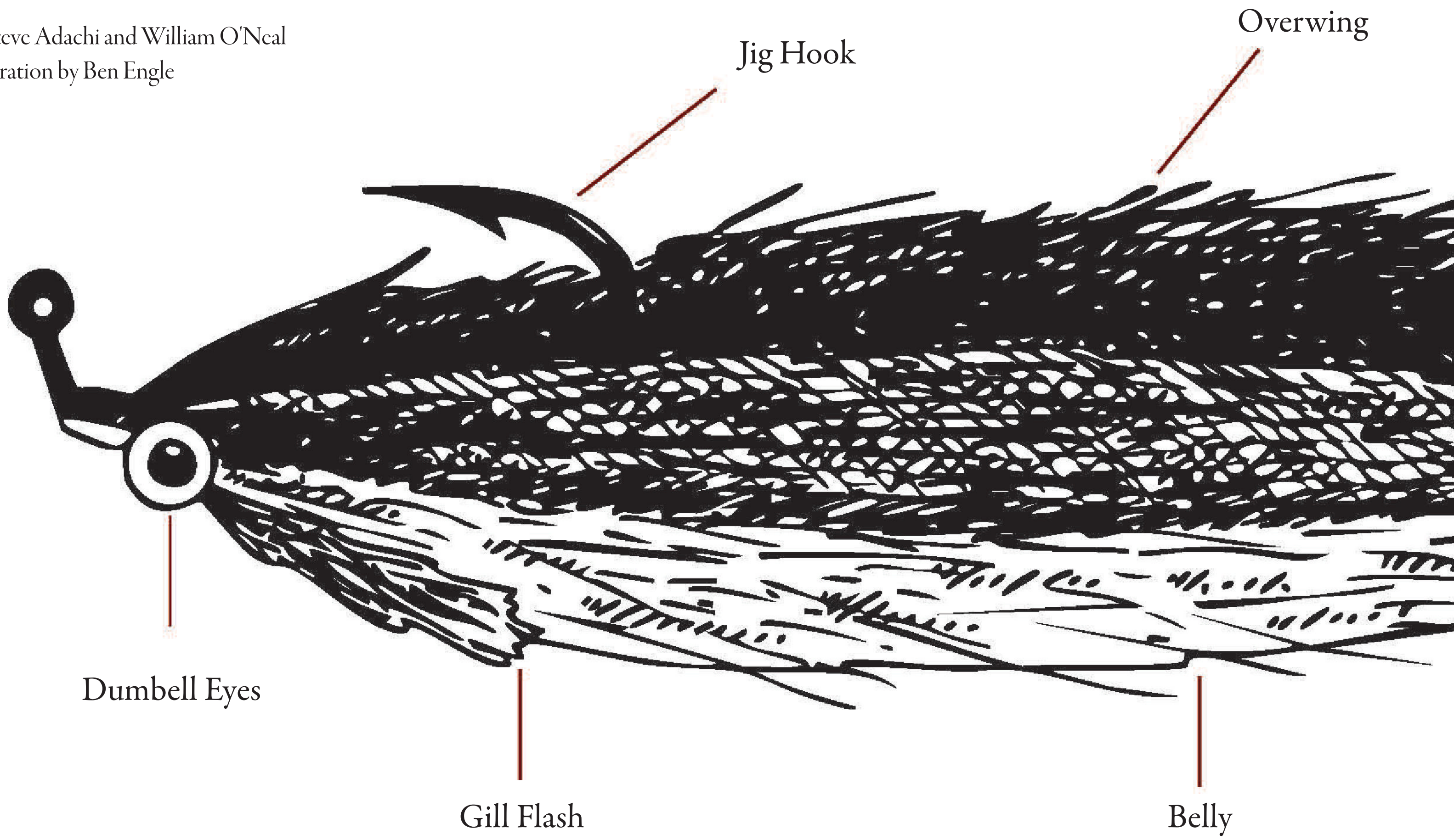
AT THE VISE

The Adachi Clouser

By Steve Adachi and William O'Neal
Illustration by Ben Engle



Simple Materials, Smart Techniques, and a Flashy Finish

If you've fished for predatory fish—whether in-shore in saltwater or deep in fast-moving rivers—you know how critical the correct baitfish pattern can be. You need something that swims like the real thing, withstands hard hits and sharp teeth, and attracts attention without being over the top.

Enter the Adachi Clouser.

This fly is a refined version of the original Clouser Minnow, tailored through years of on-the-water experience by Steve Adachi, a Northern California-based tyer, angler, and innovator. It's flash-heavy without being gaudy. It's durable without looking bulky. And most importantly—it gets eats.

We've thrown this fly at everything from striped bass in the San Francisco Bay to tigerfish in the Zambezi River. It has fooled halibut on the flats in Alameda and coaxed rockfish from kelp forests from Monterey to the Sonoma Coast. It even holds up in freshwater against largemouth, smallies, and delta bucketmouths.

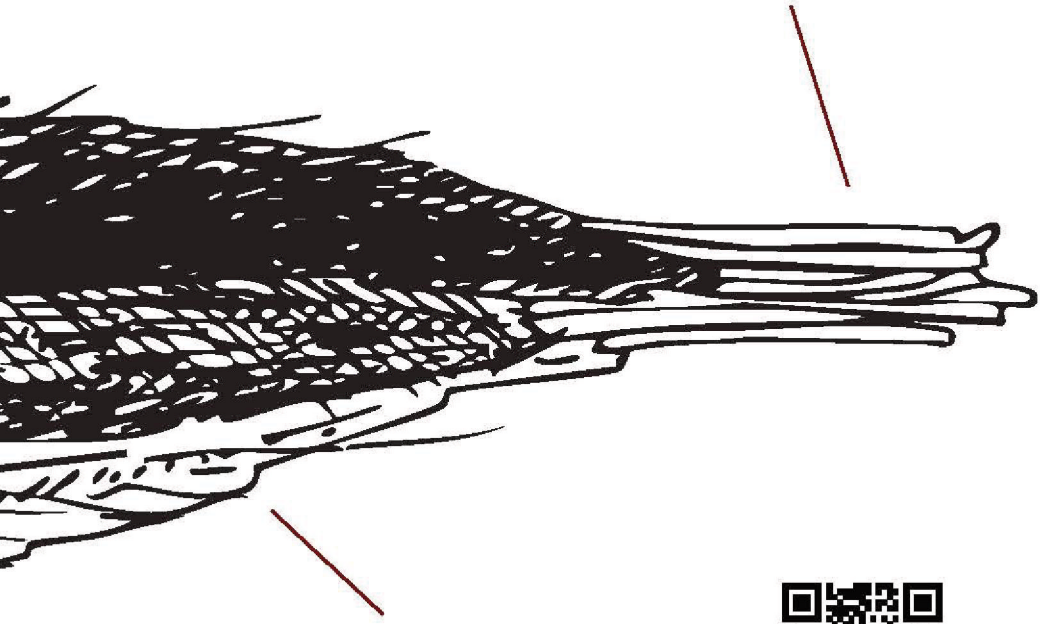
What makes this pattern so effective? It's a combination of thoughtful tapering, clever flash placement, and a rock-solid profile that mimics the silhouette of real baitfish while maintaining durability through epoxy layering.

Let's take a deep dive into how it's built—and more importantly, why it works.

WHY THE ADACHI CLOUSER?

Let's start with the name. If you're familiar with Bob Clouser's original pattern—a bucktail-and-dumbbell classic—you already know the bones of this design. But like many great flies, this one evolved through a lineage of thoughtful tweaks and field-proven refinements.

Captain Mike Costello, a legendary guide and fly tyer based in Northern California, was one of the first to adapt the Clouser Minnow



For a detailed video of Steve Adachi tying his signature fly, scan the QR code

to better suit the local forage and conditions of the San Francisco Bay and Delta systems. His version introduced important changes—especially in material selection and flash placement—that made the fly more effective in salt and brackish water for species like striped bass and halibut.

We took Mike's iteration and continued refining it—adjusting the silhouette, layering flash more intentionally, and using epoxy in stages to lock in the taper and boost durability. What you get in the Adachi Clouser is a fly that's part homage, part evolution. It's a nod to both Bob Clouser's original genius and Captain Costello's smart modifications.

Where the classic Clouser excels in simplicity, the Adachi Clouser adds just the right amount of nuance: flash that flows, a tapered body that moves naturally, and layered epoxy coats for bombproof construction.

And unlike some modern streamers that rely on complex blends of synthetic materials, this pattern uses just a few—but uses them well. Think of it as minimalist design with maximum impact.

1. THE EYE: STABILITY STARTS HERE

Everything begins with the eyes. Not only are they crucial for getting the fly to ride hook-point up, but they also set the proportions and determine how the fly moves underwater.

Start by placing your dumbbell eyes slightly back from the hook eye, generally at the one-third mark between the eye and the hook bend. This position gives the fly a balanced keel and keeps it from rolling.

Use strong, 4-pound test monofilament (we prefer Sunline) and lay down three solid wraps in one direction, followed by three in the other. This figure-eight pattern locks in the eyes and helps seat them straight. From there, build up thread wraps to stabilize the structure, then wrap around the base of the eyes to further lock it down.

2. FLASH: JUST ENOUGH, NEVER TOO MUCH

Flash is the defining feature of this fly—and also where many tyers go wrong. Too much flash and your fly becomes a glitter bomb. Too little and it disappears in low light or dirty water. The Adachi Clouser finds the sweet spot.

We use Pearl Flashabou 6905 for most patterns—it's versatile, high-contrast, and has that translucent shimmer that baitfish are known for. Cut a section and think of it as half your total flash. Fold it over when tying in to double it, which adds both durability and balance.

Here's the pro move: Cut the ends square. A square-cut flash pulses and moves more consistently in the water. Tapered or staggered cuts might look sleeker on the vise, but underwater, square ends create a fuller silhouette that flutters on the drop. That's when most predatory fish strike.

Tie it in directly behind the eyes, fold it back over itself, and bind it down with firm wraps. This creates a V-tail that adds action and flash without overwhelming the profile.

3. BUILDING THE BODY: THREAD + EPOXY

With the tail flash secured, wrap your thread forward to the hook eye and back again to build a thread underbody. This creates a smooth base for your epoxy and gives you more control over the final shape.

The first coat of epoxy locks in this thread layer and adds just enough stiffness to keep the flash aligned. We like Loon UV Flow for this stage. It's thin enough to soak into the thread, but it cures fast and clean.

Let it dry thoroughly before moving on. Rushing this stage leads to cloudy finishes or shifting materials later.

4. THE BELLY: TAPERED FOR LIFE

Most baitfish are light-colored underneath. That pale belly creates contrast from below and helps fish locate your fly, especially in stained water or low-light conditions.

Start with a piece of white synthetic material. EP Fibers or Steve Farrar's SF Blend work beautifully here. Cut it square, then taper it by hand—pinch the middle and pull strands out gently, twisting your fingers to create a gradual transition.

This section should extend slightly beyond the tail flash but remain shorter than the top wing. Aim for about a half-inch past the hook bend. Tie it in behind the eyes, wrap it forward, and fold the material back on itself. This double-layer technique not only creates a natural taper but also makes the fly far more durable.

Use sharp scissors to shape the belly, dragging them across the back of the fibers to form a clean, tapered profile. You're aiming for something that looks alive in the water, not like a toothbrush.

5. GILL FLASH: JUST A HINT

This step is optional, but if you're after realism, it's worth the extra few seconds.

Take a small section of Enrico Puglisi (EP) brush in a red, orange, or pinkish hue. Tease out a clump with your fingers and tie it in across the top of the hook shank, right behind the eyes. As you tighten it down, it'll flare slightly and form a V under the hook.

This subtle splash of color mimics gill plates, adds depth to the fly, and creates a strike trigger, especially on pause retrieves.

Don't go overboard. It's meant to be a flash, not a beard.

6. THE OVERWING: SHAPE + STRENGTH

Now it's time to add the top wing—the section that completes the baitfish profile and locks the rest in place.

Use the same synthetic material as the belly, but in a darker color. Olive, gray, chartreuse, or tan, depending on your target species and local forage. Again, cut square and taper by hand until you've got a natural gradient.

Tie it in behind the eyes, fold it back, and secure it with a few snug wraps. Then fold it again for durability and trim to match—or slightly exceed—the belly length.

The final profile should be classic baitfish: broad shoulders, sleek taper, and nothing that'll trap air or drag in the water.

7. FINAL EPOXY: LOCK IT IN

Once all your materials are in place, it's time to seal the deal—literally. This is what gives the

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Adachi Clouser its durability and professional polish.

Apply a second coat of epoxy. Focus on the head and the body area between the eyes and the front of the fly. Rotate it slowly while curing to avoid drips or uneven buildup.

Not only does this protect your thread and lock in the flash, but it adds a subtle translucency that mimics real fish scales.

Finish your thread with a whip finish and secure it with a small dab of epoxy for extra strength. Let it cure completely before fishing—or storing it in your fly box.

FISH IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT

This fly isn't meant to sit in a shadow box. It's intended to hunt.

We fish it on floating, intermediate, and full-sink lines—depending on the conditions. On the flats, a short strip-pause retrieve gets results. In rivers, swing it through current seams and strip as it drops. In the surf, give it sharp twitches and pauses to imitate an injured baitfish.

No matter where you're fishing, the Adachi Clouser holds up, gets down, and moves like it means it.

FINAL THOUGHTS: MINIMALIST MUSCLE

The Adachi Clouser isn't flashy for flash's sake. It's a minimalist baitfish that uses just enough sparkle, just enough movement, and just enough bulk to mimic the real thing, without overcomplicating the pattern.

It rewards good tying technique, not expensive materials. Every element—from the square-cut flash to the folded-overwing—serves a clear purpose.

So tie a few. Fish them hard. Lose some to rocks and big fish. And when you're ready, tweak it: Add a lateral line, blend colors, or go smaller or longer. That's when it becomes your fly.

And if you're lucky? It becomes *the* fly.

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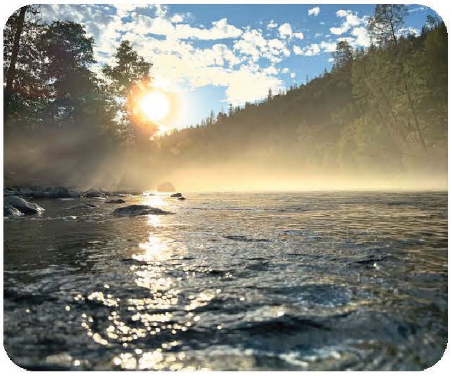

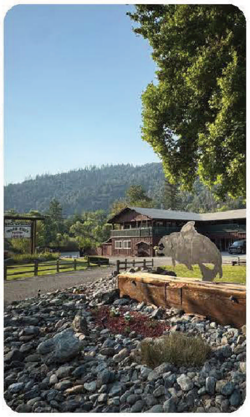

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REFLECTIONS

Anatomy Of a Fall

By Sam Silverstein

If you're looking for somewhere to crack a rib, the Middle Fork of the American River is a fine choice.

Flows vary widely, and dry riverbed is abundant. In other words: lots of rocks.

The Middle Fork American originates near Palisades Tahoe ski resort and is icy cold. If you can stand in this water long enough to encounter a trout or two without getting numb feet, please share your trick. Wool socks aren't it.

Try to time your crash for late in your visit; there's nothing anyone can do for a cracked rib, and you won't want to move much for six weeks or so, never mind make a reach cast. My own fall followed my last moments on the river, while hiking out for the drive home. My head said "step over that big one," but my feet heard nothing, and next thing I knew, I was lying on top of my fishing rod [points at sky in tribute] and cursing the boulders at eye level. The drive home sucked.

The spill has lingered in my fishing soul for longer than I'd have expected. This is me trying to get it out.

Fishing is humbling. I'd netted one trout all weekend and seen just a few follows despite perfect flows, weather, visible insect activity, generous advice, early starts, late finishes, and yes, extra weight to get to the bottom.

The weekend was frustrating in that compounding way that river fishing can produce. Around each bend was another pool of my dreams. Nymphs were drifted, streamers swung, hatches matched (ish). Everything was working except the fish part.

My last Sunday-afternoon pool—the one before the crash—was extraordinary. The river split just above it; half the water continued through a slot at the tail end while the other half eddied in a perfect circle from chest-height to an unknowable depth. An underwater sand bar, straight as a fashion runway, provided access to the center of the pool; I fished for two hours in slow 360-degree revolutions. One follow. No eats. Frustrating.

On this train of thought my spill was the caboose in a string of bad luck. A disappointing weekend's final memory would be a painful one.

Also in my fishing soul: such gratitude!

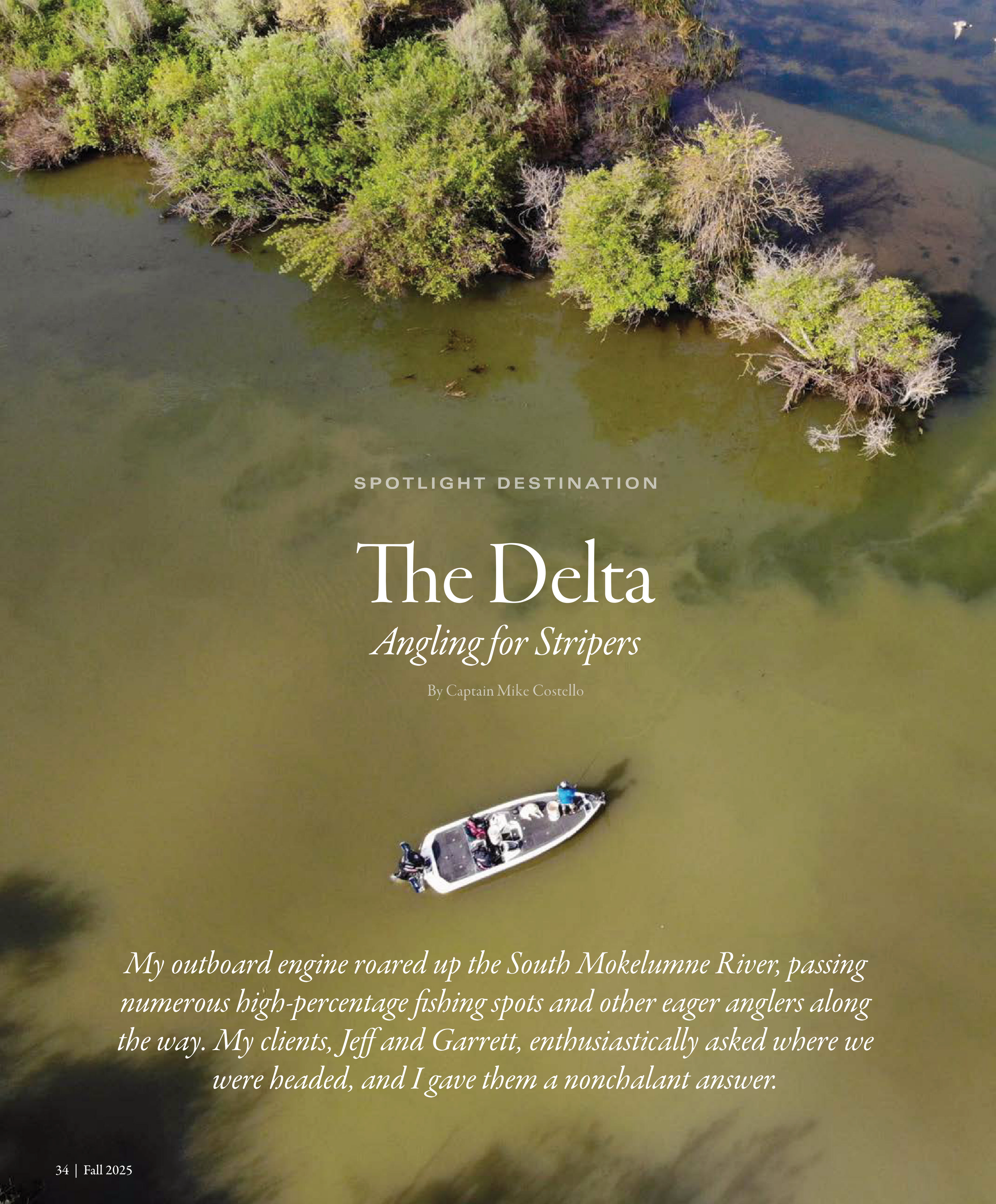
How did I fall face-first in a dry riverbed and not suffer a concussion or worse? In my mind's eye, there were small patches of dirt in the area. I fell in the one spot for miles around where my head could land on soft soil. There were people around, but not nearby. If immobilized, I would have been there a while.

In my heart of hearts, I know that my frustration from that last fruitless pool showed up in my clumsy fall. When I should have been most cautious, my head was elsewhere. My cracked rib is an obvious, lingering lesson in staying present.

And that river! Two and a half days of fascinating water, something exciting around every bend, no cell reception. I may or may not return to that exact spot on the Middle Fork of the American someday, but I certainly will never go back in time. In this narrative it was two days of California magic culminating in a miracle I wasn't more hurt.

Of the two stories, I chose the latter, starting now.

The author in a pool of his dreams on the Middle Fork of the American. Photo by David Dines



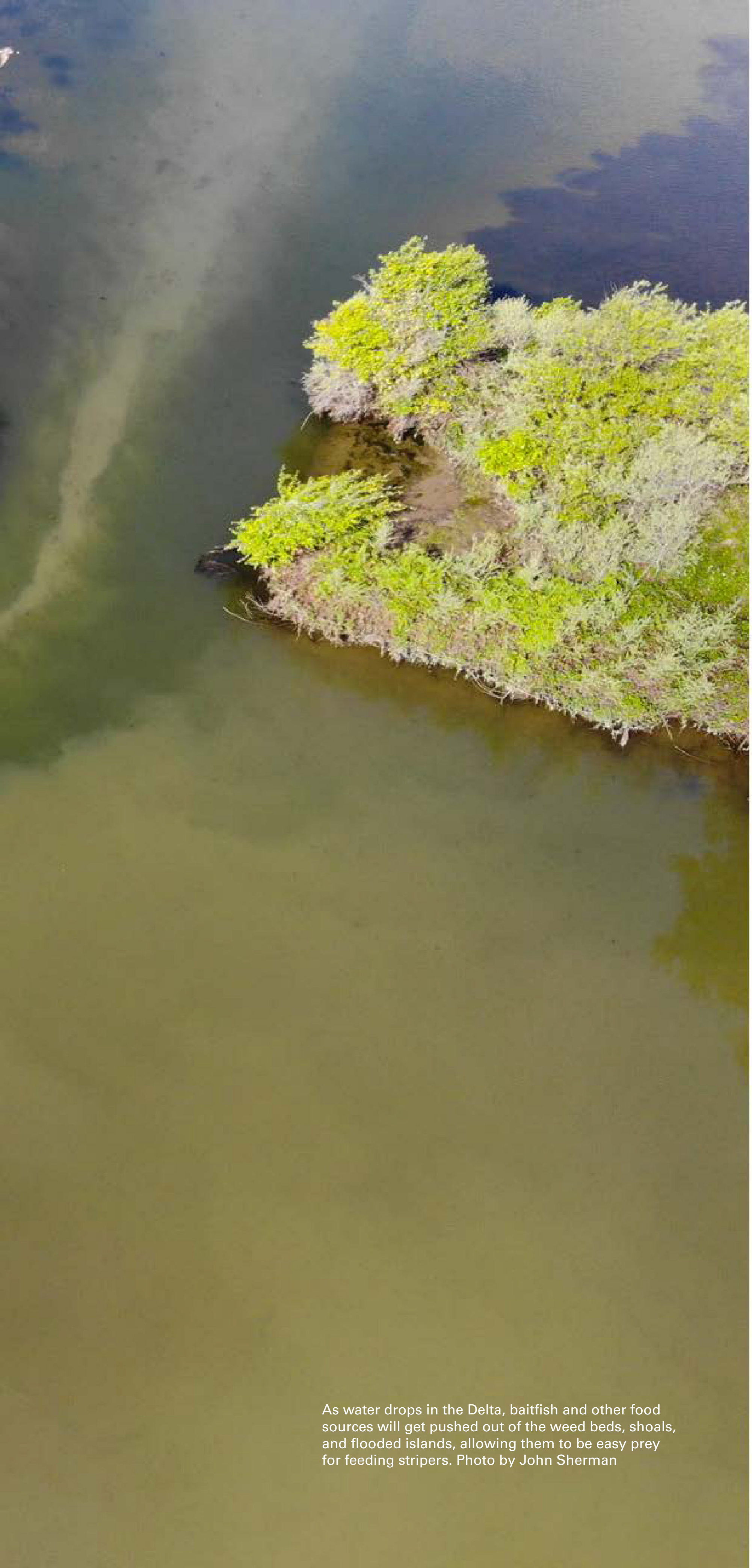
SPOTLIGHT DESTINATION

The Delta

Angling for Stripers

By Captain Mike Costello

My outboard engine roared up the South Mokelumne River, passing numerous high-percentage fishing spots and other eager anglers along the way. My clients, Jeff and Garrett, enthusiastically asked where we were headed, and I gave them a nonchalant answer.



As water drops in the Delta, baitfish and other food sources will get pushed out of the weed beds, shoals, and flooded islands, allowing them to be easy prey for feeding stripers. Photo by John Sherman

It's high tide right now, and we're going to go upriver and retrieve one of Steve Adachi's flashtail-rattle-clouser flies we broke off in a tree two days before. Not questioning their "fearless leader," they gave me one of those crazy looks that I've come to expect from my customers after 36 years of guiding anglers.

As we approached the black-over-chartreuse ornament dangling from the tree, I confidently told my anglers that a giant striped bass has been salivating over that fly hanging over the river for the last 48 hours. I removed the fly from the branch and assuredly attached it to Garrett's 9-weight fly rod, hoping my desire would become reality.

The intermediate fly lines sailed out over the shallow water, as we drifted downstream on the outgoing tide. Cast after cast, my clients effectively covered the water, anticipation building with every strip of the fly. On Garrett's 10th cast, his line tightened like piano wire and an enormous explosion occurred 60 feet off the port side of the boat. The giant creature immediately steamrolled 300 feet downstream, taking fly line, backing, and our boat for a ride. Worried about the submerged logs she was headed for, I fired up my big engine and chased her down. As we neared the large snags, I switched over to my electric motor and attempted to block the path of this huge underwater predator. Several minutes later, I got a great glimpse of the beast and realized I was going to have to use both hands to bring the trophy striper into the boat. Hoisting it from the water, I immediately knew it was the largest striped bass I ever had the privilege of tangling with. High-fives, fist-bumps, hugs, and primal yells became part of the euphoric celebration as we quickly measured, weighed, and safely released the trophy specimen back into the cold water. At 49 inches long with a 32-inch girth, the pre-spawn striper weighed an amazing 47 pounds and gave us a California Delta memory we will never forget.

The California Delta is one of the most amazing and diverse ecosystems found anywhere in the world. Surrounded by over 12 million people, it is the main artery that connects the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay to the watersheds of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountain Ranges. The Delta is fed by two major river systems, the Sacramento River and its tributaries to the north and the San Joaquin River and its tributaries to the south. With over 1,000 miles of navigable waterways, it is a complex system of river channels, sloughs, and flooded islands, critical to the support of this unique environment.

With over 55 man-made islands, most of the California Delta was dredged back in the late 1800s and early 1900s to create farmland and prevent flooding. Covering more than 735,000 acres, it is larger than the state of Rhode Island and is home to an abundance of wildlife. Mammals such as beavers, river otters, coyotes, foxes, raccoons, and even blacktail deer thrive in this nutrient-rich habitat while bald eagles, osprey, hawks, falcons, great horned owls, herons, egrets, and numerous other shore birds can be found along the numerous levees and tree-lined banks. One of the most magnificent sightings occurs during the fall months of the California Delta, when millions of ducks, geese, swans, and sandhill cranes use the Pacific Flyway to descend and winter over in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys.

Native king salmon and Pacific steelhead have used the estuary for millions of years to navigate from the rivers in which they were born, and then travel out to the Pacific Ocean, only to return to their birth rivers, completing their life cycle. White and green sturgeon are also native to the Delta, as well as a host of other non-gamefish, such as the Sacramento splittail, the Sacramento pike minnow, and the Sacramento blackfish.

The California Delta is also home to other gamefish introduced over the past 146 years, including stripers, largemouth, smallmouth, and spotted bass, bluegill, redear sunfish, black and white crappie, channel catfish, carp, and even the American shad. The first stripers to reach the West Coast was a small batch of fish from the Navesink River in New Jersey that traveled by railcar across the country and was dumped into San Pablo Bay in 1879. Only 134 of the 3- to 4-inch fish survived the journey, and out of that original stocking, an incredible fishery emerged.

It would be an understatement to say that fly fishing for striped bass in the Delta consumes me. Ever since I caught my first five-pound specimen from Discovery Bay back in 1996, I've been mesmerized by these amazing predatory fish. I wrote a book about them, I guide for them over 225 days of the year, and after 30 years of hunting them in the Delta, I never tire of having a stubborn striper—or linesider—tugging at the end of my fly rod.

GEARING UP FOR DELTA STRIPERS

The California Delta has gone through a lot of changes over the last four decades, but one thing that remains true is that it still offers the fly fisher some amazing angling opportunities. When I target stripers in the Delta, I prefer to use 9-foot, fast- to medium-action fly rods, in 8- and 9-weight line sizes. When casting large surface flies in the 7-to-10-inch range, I will sometimes go up to a 10-weight rod, and consequently, I will drop down to a lighter, 7-weight rod when my clients and I are casting smaller flies or chasing smaller fish. Saltwater-style fly rods with larger stripping guides and fighting butts tend to work the best as they allow less friction when casting heavier lines, and they make it easier for playing and landing fish. Attached to the rod, I like to use large arbor reels capable of holding at least 150 yards of backing. Striped bass in the Delta can potentially reach weights approaching 50 pounds, so having the right gear is essential for a successful day of fishing. Over the last four decades, my clients and I have noticed that striped bass in the California Delta are fighting much harder than they did 30, 20, and even ten years ago. In fact, just this past July, my clients and I were taken into our backing an amazing 15 times, by fish weighing between seven and 14 pounds. I have witnessed on numerous occasions hooked stripers acting like a runaway freight train, taking well over 100 yards of line out in a single run. Reels with smooth drags and quick line retrieval will help you land these trophy fish.

Selecting the right fly line for fishing the Delta is just as important as the rod and reel. I like to use four different lines when I am fly fishing for stripers in the Delta. Over the course of the year, the line I fish the most would be an integrated sinking line with a sink rate between six and nine inches. Most of these types of lines have an intermediate running line with the shooting head part of the line measuring around 30 feet long or shorter. Anglers can purchase sinking lines matching the specific weight of a fly rod or one that they can custom cut to match the weight of the rod. I primarily use custom cut lines that use a tungsten shooting head with a sink rate of seven inches per second. For an 8-weight rod, I cut the shooting head to 27 feet long, and for my 9-weight fly rods, I cut it down to 28 feet.

During the last 10 years, my favorite line to fish is a sink-tip with a floating running line, an intermediate "belly" and a short type-six sinking tip. Known as the Streamer Max Short, this Airflo line is a must-have when targeting stripers in three to eight feet of water. This line has completely changed the game for me and my customers and resulted in numerous double-digit linesiders.

When hunting stripers in shallow water depths of three feet and less, I either use a type-3 sinking line or an intermediate sinking line. These two lines have very slow sink rates and allow the angler to fish in shallow water or over weed beds without having to strip the fly extremely fast. When I'm fishing these lines, I often witness feeding stripers tailing, waking, or mudding, producing some amazing trophy fish in just inches of water.

Catching striped bass on topwater is one of the most astonishing experiences an angler can experience. Whether it's a lone, single fish ex-

Garret and Mike with their 47 pound trophy! Photo courtesy Mike Costello ploding on the surface or a school of ravenous stripers eating everything in sight, catching one on top is an experience an angler will never forget. I like to use floating fly lines that are overlined by two-line weights, making it easier to load the not-so-aerodynamic surface flies.

The leader systems I like to use for my sinking lines are between 6 and 7 feet long, where I typically attach a 40-pound butt section to the line, and then I use a blood knot to secure my 20-pound terminal tippet. I prefer to use monofilament over fluorocarbon because it provides more stretch in the leader material, which is critical when a large striper attacks a fly close to the boat. When fishing floating lines and surface flies, I will often lengthen my leaders from eight to nine feet. Delta water visibility varies depending on the tidal flow, upstream river flows, wind, rain, and boat traffic, with clarity varying from six inches to eight feet in the best conditions, so fluorocarbon leader material is often not necessary.

Stripers feed on a variety of baitfish and crustaceans in the Delta, and their diet has changed over the last several decades. When I first started fishing the Delta, the primary food source for linesiders was the threadfin shad. Ranging in size from two inches up to eight inches long, threadfin were introduced into the California Delta sometime in the 1950s. Fly patterns such as the flashtail-clouser and Dan Blanton's Flashtail Whistler Fly have been the most widely used patterns since I started fishing the Delta back in 1996. Chartreuse over white, grey over white, olive over white, and black over chartreuse have been my favorite color choices over the years, but that has recently changed. As threadfin shad numbers have declined in the Delta, striped bass have had to adapt to different food sources. Crawdads, or crayfish, are found throughout the Delta waterways, and in my opinion, they have become the most important food source for Delta stripers. Striped bass also like to target Sacramento splittail, bluegill, and other juvenile fish, leading me to fish flies in more subtle brown colors.

One fly that stands out every day I'm on the water is Steve Adachi's Flashtail Rattle Clouser tied in the surf brown color. Stripers have one of the most sensitive lateral lines of almost any fish, allowing them to pick up vibrations in the murkiest water and to hunt at night. It is because of this unique characteristic that I fish rattles in my flies 95 percent of the time and I am convinced it helps me catch more trophy fish. For topwater fishing, my favorite flies are the Crease Fly, the Gurgler, and the Bubble Back. When attempting to entice big stripers on top, my number one choice is Charlie Bisherat's Pole Dancer. Waking back and forth, it often resembles a confused or wounded baitfish that will bring a striped bass to the surface even when nothing is feeding on top.

Anthony Iaccarino with his personal best, 42 1/2 pound striper. Photo courtesy Mike Costello

The fly is just one part of the equation when it comes to catching stripers in the California Delta. Time and time again, I have had two anglers fishing the exact same equipment and flies, and one has considerably more success than the other. I am constantly reminding my clients to vary their fly retrieve, essentially having it resemble a wounded baitfish. This is a game-changer for enticing Delta stripers. Once my fly has reached the desired depth I would like to fish, I begin my retrieve. I prefer one to three strips of the line, anywhere from six inches to two feet, followed by pauses that let the fly flutter back down. Delta Stripers will routinely inhale the fly during the drop, often mistaking it for a fleeing crayfish, so a quick hook set is imperative.

TECHNIQUES FOR FINDING DELTA STRIPERS

The most important advice I give to fellow Delta fly anglers is "keep moving." Striper populations have fluctuated considerably over the last four decades, with fewer fish available to the angler. As salmon and steelhead numbers have plummeted, so have striped bass populations, making it much more difficult to find large schools of quality fish. During the late 1990s to around 2010, places like Discovery Bay, Mildred Island, Franks Tract, Whiskey Slough, Sycamore Slough, Hog Slough, Snodgrass Slough, and many other areas routinely produced stripers, especially from October through April. Unfortunately, many of these famous Delta fishing spots are now void of fish.

Stripers can be caught in the Delta 12 months a year, with the typical migration happening in the late summer to early fall, when striped bass leave the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay and travel up into the California Delta. Stripers will often follow the returning king salmon headed upriver to spawn, and generally they show up first in the West Delta. Under normal conditions, they will spend the late fall and winter in the Delta and then head up the rivers in the spring to perform their own spawning ritual, before returning to the ocean to feed. Unlike salmon, stripers do not perish after they spawn; in fact, they can live up to 30 years of age. Striped bass need fresh, moving water between 60 and 65 degrees to complete their spawn. The female deposits her eggs on the surface of the water, and male striped bass fertilize them. Within 48 to 72 hours, a tiny embryo is born. A 12-pound female can deposit as many as 200,000 eggs at one time. During high-water years in the Delta, stripers head further upriver to spawn. Most of the spawning occurs along the Sacramento River up near the town of Colusa. During low water years, stripers will spawn further down in the Delta.

When I wrote the book *Fly Fishing The California Delta* back in 2010, I divided the Delta into five distinct regions. The West Delta

Roger Case with his shallow water 36 pound trophy. Photo by Mike Costello

comprises any of the water extending west from the Highway 160 Bridge out to Suisun Bay. It comprises many natural tule islands and channels, and it is where the San Joaquin River and the Sacramento River join up near the town of Pittsburg, before heading to the bay. The Delta water can be very brackish, especially during drought years when the saltwater pushes further inland. Areas such as Honker Bay, Broad Slough, and Sherman Lake provide the fly fisher with excellent angling opportunities.

The North Delta includes any water north of Highway 12, comprising both the Sacramento River and the Mokelumne River. On the Sacramento side, stripers can be found along Cache Slough, the flooded Liberty Island, Prospect Slough, the deepwater shipping channel, as well as Miner Slough and Steamboat Slough. Along the Mokelumne River side, Sycamore Slough, Hog Slough, and Beaver Slough can still provide some exciting fishing for Delta linesiders, while Snodgrass Slough and Lost Slough provide a glimpse of what the Delta was like a century ago.

The East Delta comprises the smallest area and makes up the water east of the San Joaquin River, from just below Venice Island heading south towards the port of Stockton. This part of the Delta delivers good striper fishing during late fall, winter, and spring months, especially along Disappointment Slough, 14-mile Slough, the mouth of the Calaveras River, and the Stockton Deep Water Port.

During the winter months, I can typically be found fly fishing in the South Delta, as this water can provide better clarity and have warmer water temperatures. Located south of the railroad bridge bordering Jones Tract and surrounding islands, it comprises Middle River and Old River, as well as Victoria Slough and Grant Line Canal. One of the highlights of the South Delta is the waterfront community of Discovery Bay, offering sheltered water from winds, it can harbor large schools of baitfish and hungry stripers. The South Delta also includes the pumping facilities for the California Aqueduct and the Delta Mendota Canal. During certain times of the year, these pumping systems will actually reverse the tidal flows, relocating both baitfish and stripers.

The Central Delta comprises the majority of the Delta, and is located along the San Joaquin River as well as Old River, Middle River, False River, and the mouth of the Mokelumne River. For a number of years, popular fishing spots such as Franks Tract and the flooded Mildred Island were cherished by Delta fly anglers. High percentage spots like Santa Clara and San Andreas Shoals, as well Sand Mound Slough and Big Break, continue to produce quality striper fishing. Generally, the Central Delta provides the fly angler with the best opportunities for chasing stripers. With its endless weed beds, channels, and rock levees, it is much easier to locate fish and get away from windy conditions.

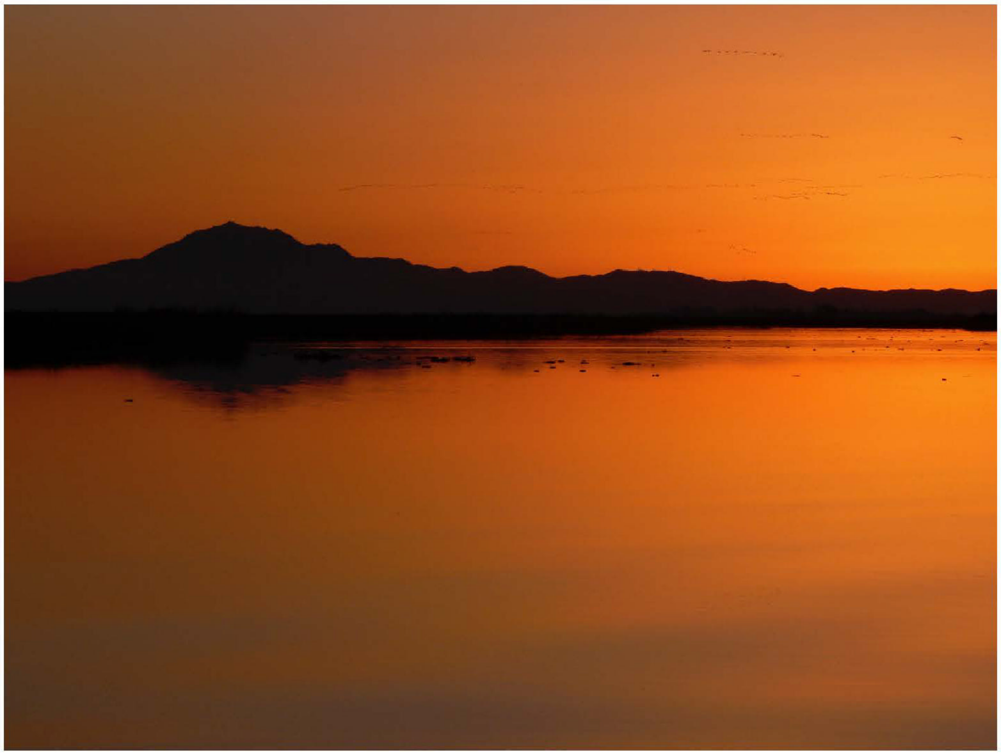
Tidal flows are the most important factor in finding linesiders. During the full moon and the new moon, anglers will generally experience higher incoming tides and lower outgoing tides, while tidal action is less during the quarter moon stages. Every day, the tides are roughly 50 minutes later than the day before, and tidal flows can vary significantly from the West Delta to areas in the North, South, and East Delta regions. This allows anglers to target specific tides over the course of a day in multiple areas.

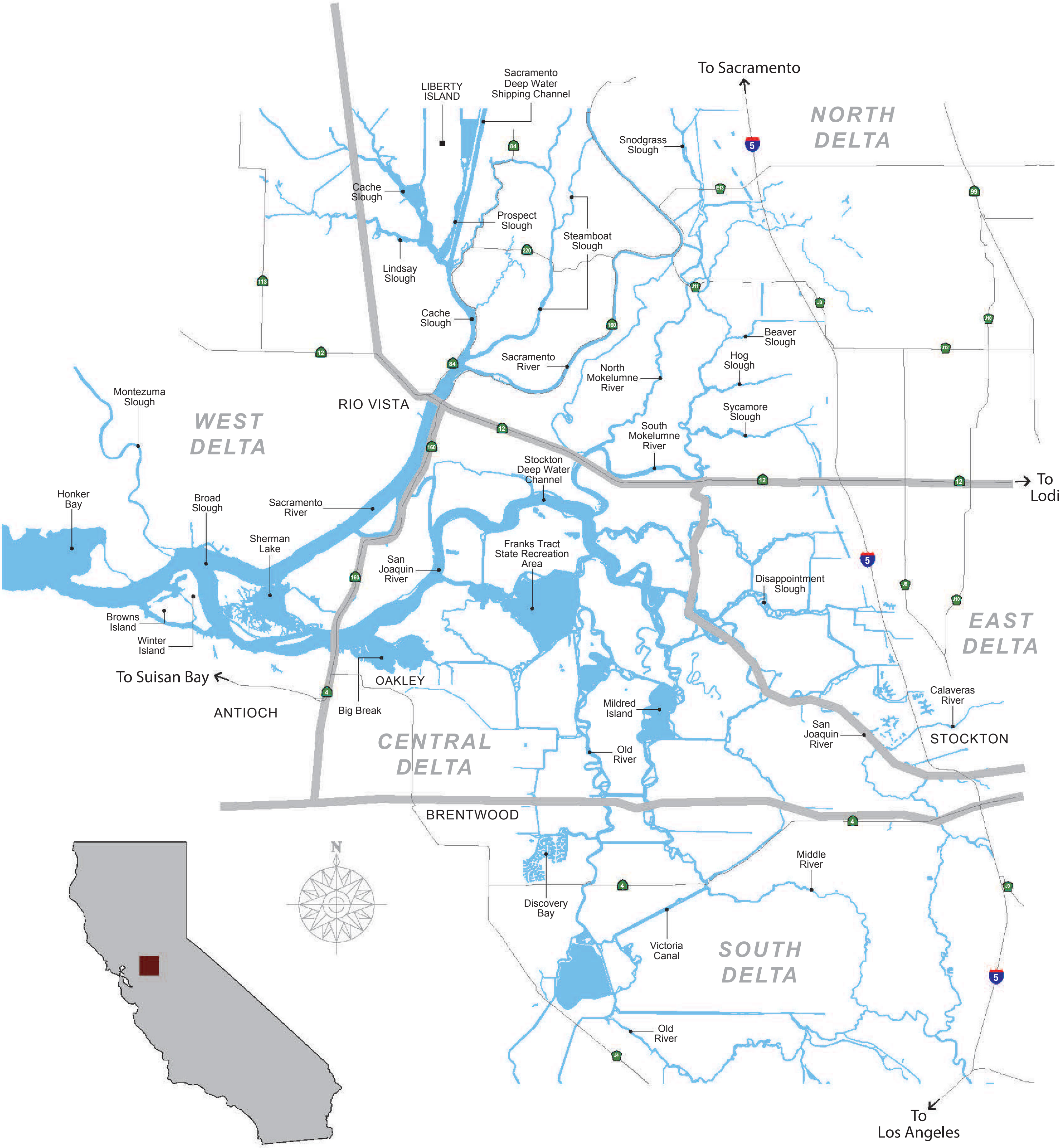
I am often asked what are my favorite tides to fish. My response is always the same: I have specific areas that I prefer during the incoming tide and others that I like to fish on the outgoing tide. What has changed over the last 30 years is the fish migration behavior. When baitfish are plentiful, stripers will herd their prey into dead-end sloughs and bays, and fly fisherpeople can follow the fish during the incoming tide and have great results. Most of my fishing today is done along shallow shoals and weed edges adjacent to deep water, where the first two hours of the incoming tide are the most productive.

In my opinion, the outgoing tide allows the fly angler more consistent fishing, especially at the bottom of the falling tide. As water drops in the Delta, baitfish and other food sources will get pushed out of the weed beds, shoals, and flooded islands, allowing them to be easy prey for feeding stripers. Tides can often vary as much as four feet from a flood tide to an ebb tide, presenting the fly angler with six to seven hours of prime fishing.

Water temperatures are also the key to experiencing great Delta striper fishing. During the early fall, water temperatures start to cool

Sunset on the Delta is a magical time. Photo by Mike Costello




To Sacramento
NORTH DELTA
LIBERTY ISLAND
Sacramento Deep Water Shipping Channel
Snodgrass Slough
Cache Slough
Prospect Slough
Steamboat Slough
Lindsay Slough
Cache Slough
Beaver Slough
Hog Slough
Sacramento River
North Mokelumne River
Montezuma Slough
WEST DELTA
RIO VISTA
Sycamore Slough
South Mokelumne River
Stockton Deep Water Channel
To Lodi
Honker Bay
Broad Slough
Sacramento River
Sherman Lake
San Joaquin River
Franks Tract State Recreation Area
Disappointment Slough
Browns Island
Winter Island
EAST DELTA
To Suisan Bay
OAKLEY
ANTIOCH
Big Break
Mildred Island
Calaveras River
San Joaquin River
STOCKTON
CENTRAL DELTA
Old River
BRENTWOOD
N
Middle River
Discovery Bay
Victoria Canal
SOUTH DELTA
Old River
To Los Angeles
5
12
4
84
160
220
113
99
E13
J11
J8
J10
J12
J9
J4

from the higher summer temperatures, causing striped bass to feed for longer periods of time. I routinely catch stripers when the water is in the low 70-degree range, but I prefer water temps in the low to mid 60s. During the middle of winter, water in the Delta can experience temperatures in the low 40-degree range, causing the striper metabolism to slow down and feed less frequently. From the end of January to early March, water temperatures can rise as much as 10 degrees, creating the perfect time to target Delta linesiders, especially when they congregate in big schools before their spawning migration.

FUTURE OF DELTA STRIPER FISHING

As I look back over the last 30 years of targeting stripers in this amazing fishery, I cannot imagine being anywhere else. Beginning my guiding career on the blue-ribbon trout streams in Colorado in 1990, I never could have imagined how much impact the California Delta and striped bass would have on my life. Every day I'm on the water is a new game I get to play with these remarkable fish, and after 7,000 days of guiding clients, I still can't believe I get paid to do it.

Delta striped bass have faced many obstacles over the years, from poaching to being blamed for the demise of salmon populations—an accusation that warrants no merit, especially when stripers and salmon coexisted in the same ecosystem for over a century, with numbers that were at all-time highs. In my opinion, the main culprit for fish decline has been the water exports and water quality issues that continue to plague the Delta. Invasive plant and animal species have also affected the overall health of the Delta. And lately an abundance of California sea lions have decided to make their home in the Delta, constantly preying on all the fish species.

The silver lining is that this striper fishery can still provide fly fishers with some amazing angling memories. One hundred-fish days are still possible, and over the last decade, my clients and I have caught numerous stripers over 20 pounds, with two weighing in at 42 pounds. 2025 has been an outstanding year, with the best overall size of fish I have witnessed since 2016. Hopefully a prelude for what's to come. The above-average rain and snowfall over the last three winters unquestionably contributed a positive impact on this ever-sustaining ecosystem.

Approaching the slicked-out skinny water, I feel like a young kid on Christmas morning, anticipation overload. I witness the giant wakes protruding along the surface 100 feet away and try to calm my nerves. The moment of truth is almost here. I am the hunter, and my prey is a school of trophy linesiders just off the port side of my boat. The line and fly shoot through the air, plopping down a few feet from my intended target. Instantaneously, there is an eruption just below the surface, as I am connected through rod, line, leader, and fly to a creature that has a special place in my heart. Yes, this is my obsession. Welcome to my little slice of heaven.

The Delta | Quick Guide

The Delta was California's first National Heritage Area (NHA), receiving the designation in 2019. NHAs support historic preservation, natural resource conservation, recreation, heritage tourism, and educational projects through public-private partnerships.

Take some time to explore the Delta towns and rich history along with your time on the water.

Camping

Brannan Island State Recreation Area, two miles south of Rio Vista
Parks.CA.gov
Sandy Beach Park and Campground, south of Rio Vista, SolanoCounty.gov

Lodging

There are many resorts and marinas throughout the Delta. Some to consider:

Vieira's Resort, 15476 Highway 160, Isleton, VieirasResort.com
Park Delta Bay, 922 W Brannan Island Road, Isleton
B&W Marina, 964 Brannan Island Road, Isleton BandWResort.net
Tiki Lagoon Resort, 12988 McDonald Road, Stockton, TikiLagoon.com
Sugar Barge Resort & Marina, 1440 Sugar Barge Road, Bethel Island
Tower Park Marina, 14900 W. Hwy 12, Lodi TowerPark-Marina.com
Appellation Wine & Roses Resort, 2505 W. Turner Road, Lodi

Fly Shops

Before heading to the Delta, drop by one of these helpful shops to gear up:
Fishing Specialties, 6360 Tupelo Dr., Citrus Heights, 916-722-1055
Lost Coast Outfitters, 540 Jackson St., San Francisco, 415-483-2278
CrossWaterCreek Outfitters, 3574 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, 925-385-0101

Guides

Capt. Bryce Tedford, 206-696-2437, BryceTedfordFlyFishing.com
Capt. Toby Uppinghouse 916-505-4773, EdgewaterOutfitters.com
Capt. Andy Guibord, 916-722-1055, FlyFishingSpecialties.com
Capt. Ben Thompson, 916-743-8290 BenThompsonOutdoors.com
Capt. Chuck Ragan, 530-2057851, CRFlyFishing.com
Capt. Hogan Brown, HGBFlyFishing.com
Capt. Mark Pinto, 209-581-3474, PintosHomeWaters.com
Capt. Patrick McKenzie, 707-721-6700, MackenzieOnTheFly.com

Things to Do

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial – Visit the site of the worst home-front disaster of WWII. Reservations required. Tours depart from John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez

Town of Locke – listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it is the only town in the U.S. built exclusively by the Chinese Americans who built the Delta's levees and ditches, going on to become farmworkers. Several museums, including the Jan Ying and Locke Boarding House Museum, can be visited for free along main street.

Foster's Bighorn – Top spot for a apres-fishing meal or refreshment with spectacular taxidermy (250+!) adorning the walls.
143 Main Street, Rio Vista FostersBighorn.com

Access Maps

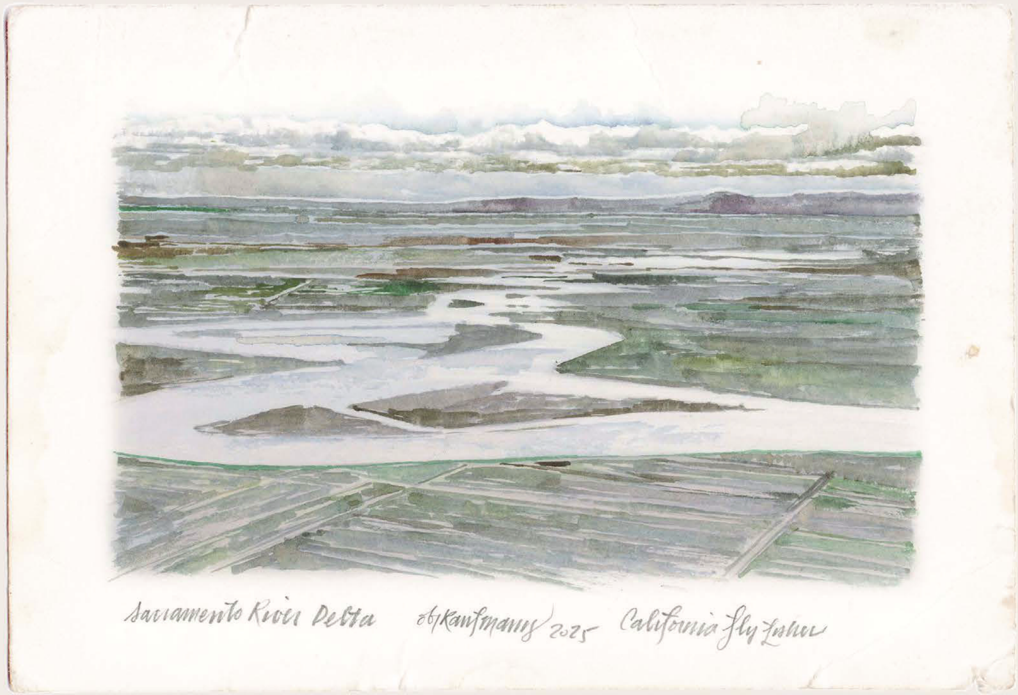
The Fish "N" Map California Delta from CaliforniaDeltaMaps.com details boat ramps, roads, marinas, and campgrounds.

California Delta Waterways and Delta Fish Card from FrankosMaps.com offer colorful laminated reference maps.

FIELD NOTES

GEOLOGY: SACRAMENTO-SAN JOAQUIN DELTA

By Jeff Ludlow
Illustrations by Obi Kaufmann



The beating heart of California's rivers is the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta (Delta). Her arteries flow from as far north as the Cascade Mountains down to the Sacramento River watershed, and from as far south as the Southern Sierra Nevada to the San Joaquin River watershed. The Delta receives a staggering amount of the state's water, with runoff from about 40 percent of California and approximately 50 percent of the state's total streamflow. Though like any uncared-for heart, the Delta is not well. First, let's start with the origin story.

The Delta was formerly at the bottom of Lake Corcoran, a large inland lake that covered most of the Central Valley approximately 750,000 years ago. During this time, the Sierra Nevada were covered with ice and sea levels were about 400 feet lower than today. The San Francisco Bay was a broad river valley that extended out to the Farallon Islands. Initially, Lake Corcoran drained through the Coast Range into the Salinas River watershed to Monterey Bay. However, tectonic uplift of the southern Coast Range approximately 620,000 years ago sealed this outlet and a new one formed in the next lowest notch in the range, near present day Crockett and Benicia. What likely resulted was a torrent of water draining the lake and carving out the narrow Carquinez Strait. This new outlet effectively drained the ancient Lake Corcoran and the modern-day course of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers were set; the Delta was born.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is known as an Inverse Delta. Typically, deltas grow downriver and seaward as rivers deposit sediments into an open body of water, like the Mississippi Delta. Because of the massive amount of stream flow that is restricted at the narrow Carquinez Straits, the rivers have "backed up" behind the straits and thus dropped their sediment before they reach an open body of water. What results is an upriver landward growth of the Delta over time. Additionally, during post-glacial sea level rise, starting approximately 10,000 years ago, rising seas and tidal action added to the upriver growth of the Delta. Historically, tidal influences have been measured as far inland as the Cosumnes River, and the salinity freshwater interface at Cortland on the Sacramento River.

The upriver landward growth of the Delta over the millennia can also be seen in its stratigraphic record. The most common vertical sequence of soil deposits shows peat and mud of tidal marshes directly overlying alluvial sediments of rivers, a sequence recording landward spread of tidal environments rather than seaward migration of fluvial environments. This overlapping soil sequence shows the encroaching intertidal marsh deposits on the older soils that were deposited by rivers as sea level rose and the Delta advanced landward.

Now, we return to the sinking heart of California's river system. The Delta is one of the state's largest and most altered ecosystems, resulting primarily from agricultural use and the massive north-to-south transfer of water. In the late 1800s, levees were built along the steam channels protecting them from flooding and island tracts were drained for agricultural purposes. This resulted in land subsidence to elevations as low as 15 feet below sea level. As the land subsides, levees become vulnerable to failure and thus threaten water quality. Most subsidence in the Delta is caused by oxidation of organic carbon in peat. In its saturated condition, peat is anaerobic (oxygen-poor). When peat is drained for agricultural use, it becomes aerobic (oxygen-rich) and releases great amounts of carbon dioxide (a well-known greenhouse gas) to the atmosphere. As the gas releases, the peat collapses or settles causing land subsidence.

The other consequence of land subsidence relates to the quality of Delta water transferred south. The western Delta islands are believed to slow the inland spread of saltwater from the Bay into the Delta. If these islands flood, the transferred Delta water may become too saline for use. To mitigate this risk, Folsom, Shasta and Oroville dams release prescribed amounts of freshwater in summer and fall to push saltwater west, away from the pumps that transfer Delta water for agricultural and municipal use.

Like many mitigative solutions to environmental impact, wildlife habitat restoration is an effective method to slow land subsidence in the Delta and to maintain water quality. Federal and state restoration programs are focused on the periphery of the Delta and away from the central islands where significant settlement has already occurred. The combined issues of Delta land subsidence, water quality, and habitat restoration will continue to present interrelated challenges for California water managers for years to come.

Atwater, Brian F., 1982. *Geologic Maps of the Sacramento – San Joaquin Delta*, California. US Geological Survey

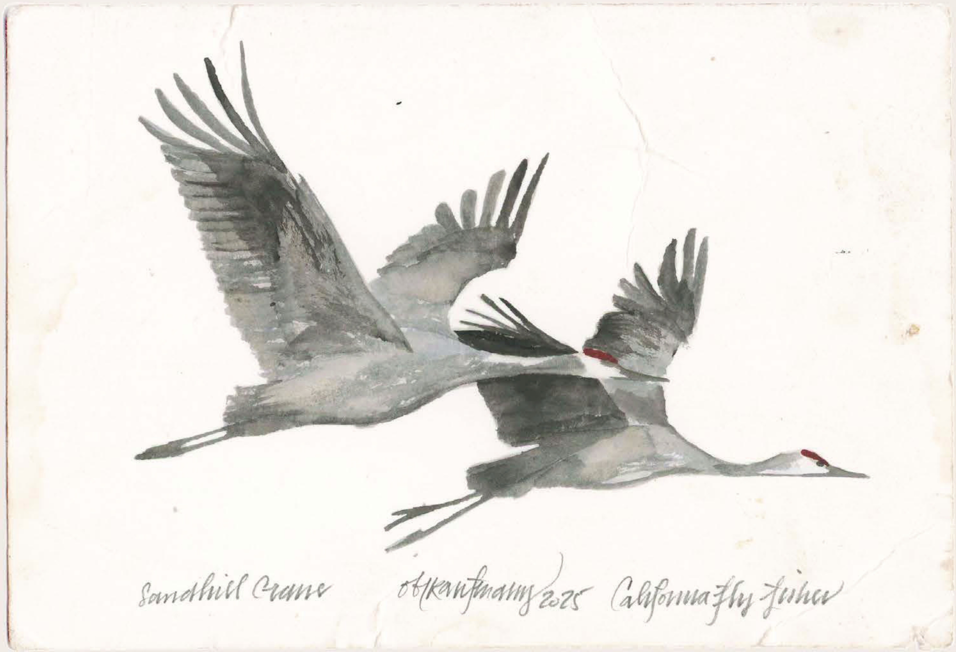
Ingebritsen, S.E., US Geological Survey, Ikehara, Marti E., National Geodetic Survey. Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, USGS Publications Circ 1182 11Delta

Rogers, David J., Storesund, Rune, 2011. *Geologic Setting of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta*. Berkeley NSF RESIN Project Meeting, January 26.

Wong, Kathleen, 2006. "Carquinez Breakthrough." *Bay Nature Magazine*, Fall.

THE MAJESTIC RETURN OF THE SANDHILL CRANES

By Jane H. Adams, Lodi Sandhill Crane Association, Board of Directors



Each fall, one of California's most extraordinary wildlife spectacles takes place in the Central Valley. After traveling thousands of miles from their breeding summer grounds in the northern U.S., Canada, and even Siberia, flocks of sandhill cranes (*Antigone canadensis*) arrive to spend the winter months in California's wetlands and agricultural fields.

Standing nearly four feet tall with a wingspan that can stretch seven feet, sandhill cranes are unmistakable. Their long legs, graceful necks, and red-capped heads make them easy to spot against the golden light of a Central Valley sunset. But what often captures people most is their sound—a loud, rolling trumpet call that echoes across the sky and marshes.

For centuries, the Central Valley's natural floodplains provided perfect wintering habitat for cranes. Today, much of that land has been converted to farms and development. Surprisingly, cranes have adapted, like they have done for thousands of years, feeding in harvested corn and grain fields while still relying on the remaining wetlands for roosting at night.

Conservation areas such as the Woodbridge Ecological Reserve in the Delta, managed by the State of California Department of Fish and Wildlife; the Cosumnes River Preserve, managed by seven land-owning partners; and Staten Island managed by The Nature Conservancy, all play a vital role in giving the birds safe refuge for roosting and food.

Sandhill cranes are also known for their spectacular dances which strengthen the pair bond. Even in winter, pairs can be seen leaping, bowing, and flapping their wings in playful displays that strengthen their lifelong bonds. These performances are a favorite sight for birdwatchers and photographers.

For many Californians, seeing the cranes each year is more than just a glimpse of wildlife—it's a seasonal tradition and a reminder of the importance of preserving open spaces. Festivals, like the Lodi Sandhill Crane Festival, celebrate their arrival and invite people to connect with nature.

The 2025 Lodi Sandhill Crane Festival will be held November 7 – 9 at the Hutchins Street Square, 125 S. Hutchins Street, Lodi, California. The free festival features an art show, Friday night reception with silent auction, presentations on sandhill cranes and other wildlife, vendors, and hands-on family activities. Tours, which require pre-registration, are scheduled for early morning fly-outs, during the day, and evening fly-ins.

As long as wetlands and farmland remain available, these ancient birds—whose ancestors date back millions of years—will continue to grace the Central Valley with their presence, inspiring awe and wonder for generations to come.

Jane Adams discovered Sandhill Cranes after moving to Sacramento and attending the Lodi Sandhill Crane Festival. Captivated, she is a 20-year docent with California Fish and Wildlife and volunteers at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary in Nebraska. As a Lodi Sandhill Crane Association board member, she shares her passion for educating others about these birds. *LodiSandhillCrane.org*

GUIDE PROFILE

Captain Mike Costello

Owner and operator of Pacific Adventures
Years Guiding: 36

How did you decide to become a guide? I became a guide back in the summer of 1990 when I moved from Southern California to Basalt, Colorado, and started guiding on the Frying Pan and Roaring Fork Rivers. My passion for fishing led me to this dream job. After over 7,000 days of guiding clients, I still can't believe I get paid to do this. I am so grateful for every day I get to spend on the water and for the wonderful friendships I have made along the way.

How do you balance guiding with family and personal life? That is a challenge that every guide faces, especially if they have a significant other or are married and have family. I've always associated guiding and the ups and downs I face every day on the water with the experience of a professional athlete. No matter what people say, as a guide, you are still graded on your performance, and that often equates to your success at catching fish, which can be quite stressful at times. I always give 100 percent and balancing that commitment day after day, year after year, requires dedication, discipline, and perseverance. I work to separate the guiding part of my life and be there for the ones I love. I can profoundly say I am a lot better at that now in my late 50s than I was in my 20s.

Are there specific conservation concerns in your area that you want to draw attention to? The California Delta is always a hot topic when it comes to environmental concerns in our state. The health of this ecosystem directly impacts many fish species, especially migratory salmon and steelhead that use it as a nursery and highway to navigate rivers to the north and south. Water is always the main issue, when the state experiences above-average rainfall and snowpack, all fish benefit. I used to spend over 80 days a year floating the Lower Sacramento River chasing trout and steelhead, mostly during summer when the river often flowed between 14,000 and 16,000 cubic feet per second, delivering cold water to the Delta. In contrast, during the drought years, summer flows dropped to as low as 4,500 cubic feet per second, creating a much warmer environment for fish. During the summer of 2024, I observed water temperatures in the West Delta reach as high as 79 degrees, making it very difficult for migratory fish to survive. Adding to the water problems are ongoing herbicide treatments for weed control and a sea lion population that has recently quadrupled in the Delta. All these factors influence the overall health of this fishery.

Is mojo a thing? Every angler has that special day, and some seem to experience it more often than others. I believe that when you approach your fishing day with a positive attitude and accept what the water gives you, you'll be rewarded with great "mojo." My motto: "Fish hard and good things will happen." And always remember, we're just guides, not God.

What changes, for better or worse, have you noticed since you started guiding? Unfortunately, with social media and the internet, everyone is way too quick to share fishing information. I enjoy the hunt, discovering new spots, and the challenges the fish throw at us every day.

What is your most memorable catch and why? All the giant trophy stripers my clients and I have caught are truly memorable, but grabbing hold of Garrett Kubota's 47-pound beast of a striper and hoisting it from the water was something truly amazing. Catching it on a fly that my client broke off in tree two days prior, retrieving it, and then attaching it to his leader, became "fishing folklore."

Describe your ideal client? Someone who fishes hard and is addicted to this crazy, life-enriching sport!

What is your favorite trick or tip to teach others? Stripers like to feed on dying or descending baitfish. Make sure you set on the slightest of "ticks" or grabs; it could be a giant linesider inhaling your fly.

What's the #1 thing you wish every client knew or would do? It's important to learn how to play fish properly. Applying the correct pressure while fighting a fish will help you as an angler land more trophy fish.

One piece of gear/equipment you can't live without? Guiding on the Delta, the most important piece of equipment is my Minn Kota electric motor. I can guide without my fish finder, but my electric motor is critical in putting my clients onto fish.

Favorite gear under $100? Is anything in fly fishing under $100? Actually, Steve Adachi's custom, flashtail rattle Clouser flies, coming in at under $20, are worth more than gold to this captain on many days.

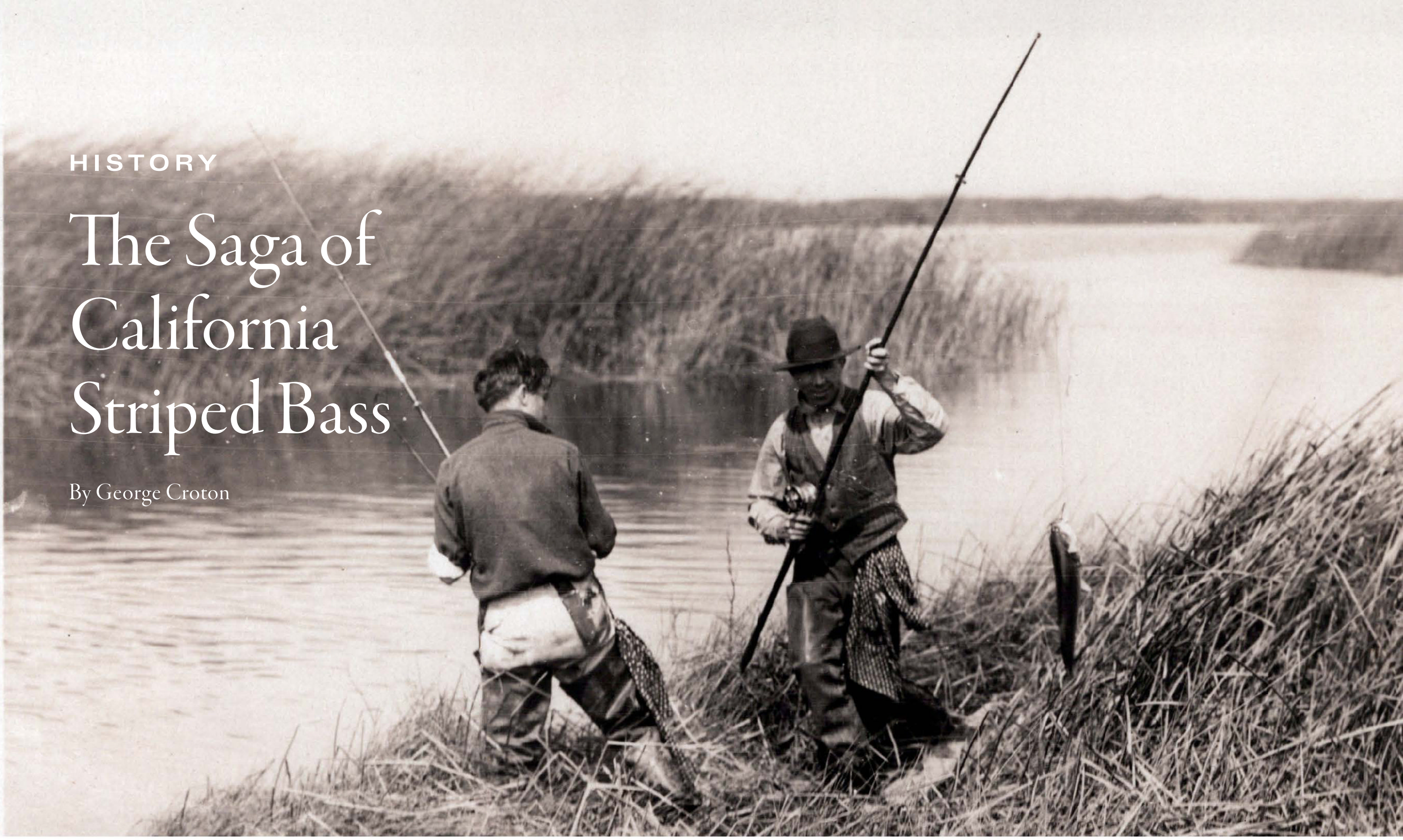
7 QUESTIONS WITH MIKE

1. **Your favorite fly:** See above!
2. **Your go-to river snack:** Panera, "Everything but the Kitchen Sink Cookie" that a few of my clients fortunately bring me on their monthly fishing excursion.
3. **Favorite band/song for fishing:** Hank Williams Jr., "Country Boy Can Survive"
4. **Favorite meal under $15:** New York prime steak cooked at home on my grill!
5. **Favorite après fishing beverage:** Fall and Spring: red wine, Winter: 12-year-old Macallan, Summer: Cadillac Margarita
6. **Stupidest question a client has asked:** When my clients and I are drifting a river and someone says, "So, how are we going to go back upriver and get our car?"
7. **If you were a fish, what kind would you be?** Unequivocally, a striped bass. They live upwards of 30 years, can spend time in both freshwater and saltwater, and are a supercharged, "bad ass" predator.

HISTORY

The Saga of California Striped Bass

By George Croton



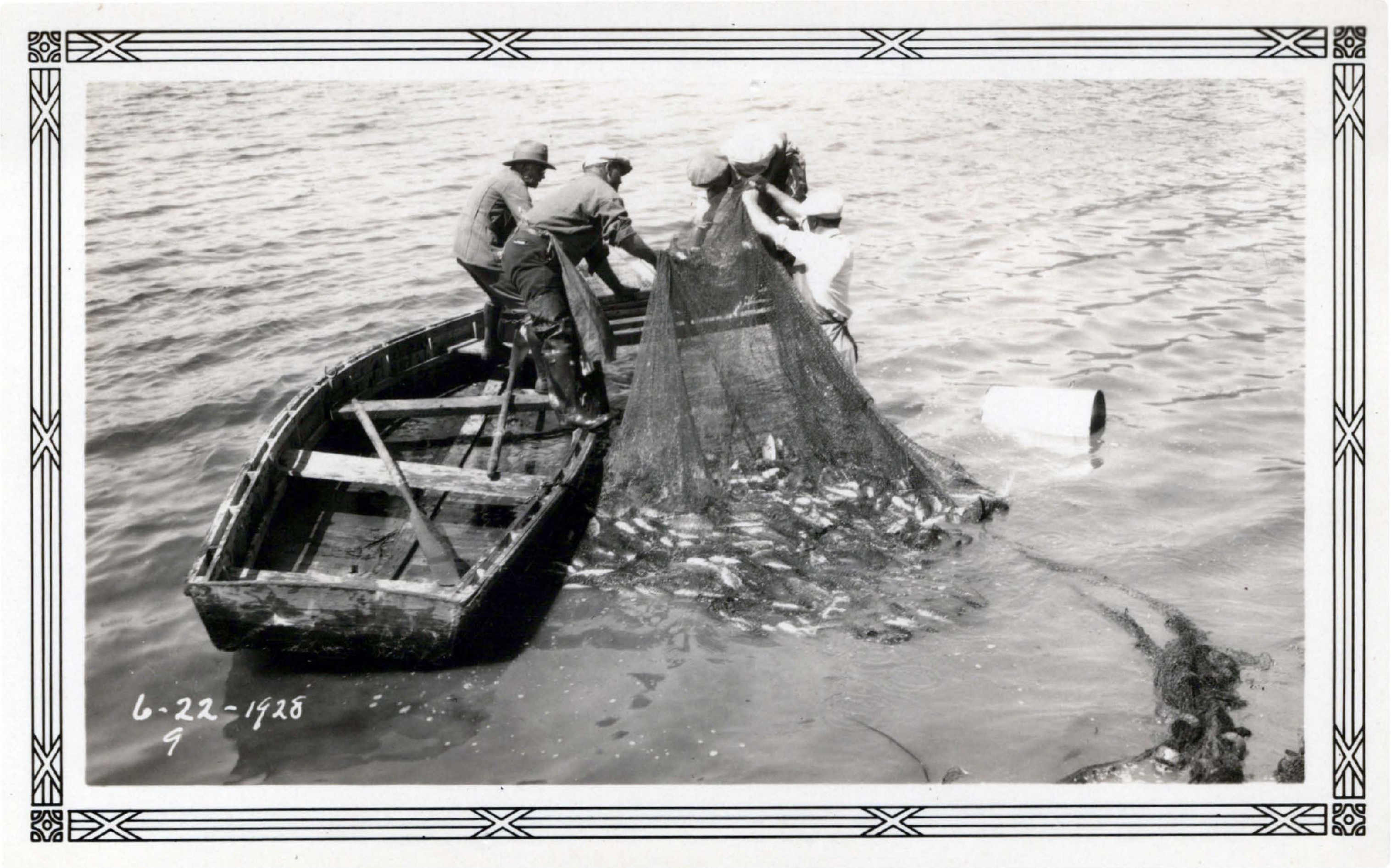
On weekends and holidays, thousands of anglers rig up their rods and set out for the sloughs, bays and ocean beaches adjacent to San Francisco. Photo by Eugene Scofield

"Ton Ton Shorty" Revel with a nice striper caught in San Pablo Bay circa 1950.Photo courtesy George Revel

"Why did you let him go?" The old timer said to me. "Those are good eating! And they're invasive. You should never throw 'em back."

I was fishing a San Francisco beach and had just released a little 15-or-so-inch striper. The old timer stopped to watch as I landed it, as folks sometimes do. I generally don't keep fish and don't really remember how I responded—probably mumbled something about letting them go to let them grow or the fish being too short. But his comment stuck with me and made me wonder. I had a general sense that striped bass were more of an East Coast fish, famously the province of those with thick Yankee accents and Boston Whalers that were actually acquired near Boston. I knew they had come to California some time in the murky past and had made themselves at home. But I had no idea *how* they had arrived on this side of the continent, let alone how they became such a fixture. So I decided to find out.

Striped bass are among the most popular game fish in Northern and increasingly Southern California, and for good reason. They can be found anywhere from the beaches of Marin County to muddy South Bay sloughs to the winding Sacramento River, depending on the time of year. They aggressively eat bait, lures, and flies, put up a spectacular fight, and can grow to a truly enormous size. Many Californians grew up patrolling beaches and rivers in pursuit of "ol' linesides," and continued doing so into their adulthood. But I've found that, like me, many of



Commercial fishermen netting striped bass for sale in San Francisco fish markets. Photo courtesy California Department of Fish and Wildlife

those same Californians weren't familiar with the complicated history behind the presence of their favorite fish in their home waters, as well as the struggles they face today.

To understand the history of West Coast striper, it's helpful to get a brief overview of their East Coast ancestors. Striped bass evolved along the Atlantic coast of North America, migrating along a range from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, spending most of their lives in salt water but spawning in the region's myriad rivers and streams. Long before European settlers arrived, native peoples like the Wampanoag relied on striped bass as a food source, capturing them in wooden weirs as they migrated into tidal creeks and estuaries, then smoking and storing them to eat during the winter and trade with neighboring tribes.

When the pilgrims showed up, they were shocked by the abundance of the striped bass, and given their difficulties farming in an unfamiliar climate, they quickly took advantage. In 1637, Plymouth colonist Thomas Morton wrote, "The Basse is an excellent Fish, both fresh and Salte. They are so large, the head of one will give a good eater a dinner, and for daintiness of diet, they excell the marybones of Beefe. There are such multitudes, that I have scene stopped into the river close adjoining to my house with a seine at one tide, so many as will loade a ship of 100 tonnes…"

Without the striped bass to feed them, the fledgling Plymouth Colony might not have survived. Early colonial historian William Hubbard wrote, "in the year 1623 the Plymouth colonists had but one boat left, and that none of the best, which then was the principal support of their lives, for that year it helped them for to improve a net wherewith they took a multitude of bass, which was their livelihood all that summer."

A young George E. Revel showing a catch from the San Francisco Bay. Photo courtesy George Revel

The fishery was so vital to the colony that it became the subject of America's first conservation law—in 1639, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony ordered that striped bass were not to be used as fertilizer for farm crops, in order to preserve the developing commercial fishery. In 1670, Plymouth Colony ordained that all annual income to

The pencil description on the back of this photo reads "they had more fish than they could use. They had only wanted 5 tons and they got 10 tons." Photo courtesy California Department of Fish and Wildlife

the colony from the Cape Cod striped bass fishery be used to fund a free school—America's first public school! It's clear that the striped bass were a cornerstone of early American culture and diet. As the nation expanded westward, the fishery's culinary and commercial importance traveled with it.

Fast-forward to San Francisco in 1879, just 10 years after Leland Stanford hammered the final golden spike joining the rails of America's first transcontinental railroad. At that time, one S.R. Throckmorton was the chairman of the California Fish Commission, an ancestor of today's California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and the first conservation agency in the country. Mr. Throckmorton had a vision. In a letter to Professor Spencer Fullerton Baird, the first curator of the Smithsonian Museum and the first U.S. Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries, Throckmorton wrote, "I have long had the impression that the great bay of San Francisco, together with the bays of San Pablo and Suisun connecting with it and the number of creeks running into them, affording a variety of qualities and conditions regarding temperature and saline properties, together with feeding material, would be well adapted to the propagation and growth of striped bass."

Scientific understanding of the natural world was quite different in those days, to put it mildly. Humanity's total dominion over nature was accepted as a given, the idea of an interconnected ecosystem was just beginning to develop, and the value of fish and wildlife were primarily evaluated through a commercial lens. In that context, Mr. Throckmorton—a Californian transplant himself, by way of New York—saw an opportunity to introduce a highly promising food fish to the young Golden State. So at Mr. Throckmorton's suggestion, Mr. Livingston Stone of the U.S. Fish Commission collected 162 striped bass from the Navesink River in New Jersey, loaded them onto a train, and shipped them to California. Some of these fish died during their rough transcontinental journey, but about 135 survived. When they arrived, they were released into the Carquinez Strait at Martinez. All of California's striped bass are descended from these fish, along with an additional plant of 300 fish gathered from New Jersey's Shrewsbury River and released in Suisun Bay in 1882.

As Throckmorton predicted, the striped bass quickly made themselves at home. Within a few years, they were being caught all the way from Sausalito to Monterey Bay. In less than 10 years, a dedicated commercial fishery had been established, and striped bass were available for purchase in San Francisco fish markets throughout the year. By 1899, the net commercial catch averaged well over a million pounds annually. Commercial fishers plied purse seines and gill nets, scooping up hundreds or even thousands of fish at a time. These fish typically weighed about 8-10 pounds, but CDFW has an authenticated record of a 78-pound fish sold at a San Francisco fish market in 1910.

Eventually, the free-for-all in commercial fishing began to take a toll. Striper had become the favorite among local recreational anglers—bass fishing clubs sprung up around the Bay Area, advocating for increasingly strict conservation laws. As a result, the commercial fishery was permanently shut down by 1935. This period could be considered a golden age for the Bay Area striped bass sport fishery. In 1927, fisheries scientist Eugene Scofield wrote that "on weekends and holidays thousands of admirers of this game fish rig up their rods and set out for the sloughs, bays and ocean beaches adjacent to San Francisco. Not often do they return home disappointed, for the striped bass are ever abundant."

Unfortunately, the abundance didn't last, and this is where things begin to get really complicated. California urbanized rapidly after the turn of the century, and folks that are far smarter than me have written extensively about the host of anthropogenic factors that caused the accompanying decline of the Golden State's fish and wildlife populations. In short, the human population skyrocketed, dams and aqueducts diverted rivers; wetlands were dredged and developed; and water pollution became widespread. And like California's own native anadromous salmonids, the striped bass suffered. Hundreds of millions of fry were

"Shorty" shows up with dinner again. A fish likely to be turned into his signature "Stripe'ped Bass Salad." Photo courtesy George Revel

entrained by State Water Project pumps and PG&E power plant intakes each year, spawning habitat in the Delta was systematically destroyed, and populations of forage species dwindled. In the early 1960s, the total striper population in the Bay-Delta system was estimated at around four million fish. By 1980, that number had fallen to one million fish. Far and away the greatest culprit behind this precipitous decline is our intense and ever-increasing diversion of freshwater from its natural courses, which has also devastated our salmon and steelhead populations.

But the decline of the striped bass didn't attract as much media attention as that of loved native species like salmon, steelhead, and delta smelt. And around this time, public attitudes toward striped bass began to shift. Where ol' linesides had been valued as a gamefish worth protecting, it was now viewed as a voracious invader, steadily chomping its way through diminishing native fish populations. The CDFW had previously aimed to protect the fishery through the Striped Bass Management Program, established in 1981, which sold striped bass stamps to fund research, population monitoring, enforcement efforts and hatcheries. These efforts were largely abandoned in 1992 amid concerns that striped bass predation was harming winter-run salmon. Large agricultural water users, embattled by the growing consensus that native fish decline was mainly due to water diversion and related habitat loss, decided to blame other factors. In 2008, a group called the Coalition for a Sustainable Delta sued the CDFW, alleging that the Department's policies favoring striped bass violated the Endangered Species Act by facilitating predation on endangered native fish. The CDFW settled the lawsuit by proposing regulatory changes aimed at reducing the striped bass population, though in 2020, they reversed course again, opting instead for a holistic approach that supports both the recreational striped bass fishery and the conservation of threatened native species.

This brings me back to the old-timer's well-intentioned comments on that San Francisco beach. It's easy to villainize striped bass as an invasive species, much like how humans tend to villainize other perceived "foreign invaders." But the reality is more complicated. Prominent fisheries scientists have started calling California's striped bass a "scapefish" because of the misguided blame it gets for the decline of anadromous salmonids. However, before the massive water diversions that began toward the end of the 20th century, striper lived in relative harmony with steelhead and salmon—all three were able to maintain healthy populations. Salmon smolt make up a tiny part of an average striper's diet, despite what you might see on social media. Research shows that striped bass mostly eat insects, occupying a similar ecological niche to native pikeminnow. Scientific understanding has advanced a lot since the 19th century, and we now know that it is not a great idea to introduce a foreign species into a complex, delicate ecosystem like the San Francisco Bay estuary. But all things considered the data indicates that striped bass are relatively good house guests, especially compared to other non-native species. As a result, they have become a vital part of California's aquatic landscape over the past 150-odd years.

Today, stakeholders estimate that about 200,000 striped bass remain in the Bay-Delta system—a far cry from the glory days of the past. They face an increasing number of environmental threats, like most of California's fish. However, Californian anglers continue to come together to advocate for their striped friends, which supports the livelihoods of guides and outfitters all across the state. Organizations such as the California Striped Bass Association and the California Bass Union work hard to promote sensible regulatory policies, encourage good fishing practices, and combat misinformation. With the help of dedicated individuals like them and the wonderful readers of *California Fly Fisher*, we can protect and preserve our oddball striper fishery, made up of fish that have settled in so well so far from home.

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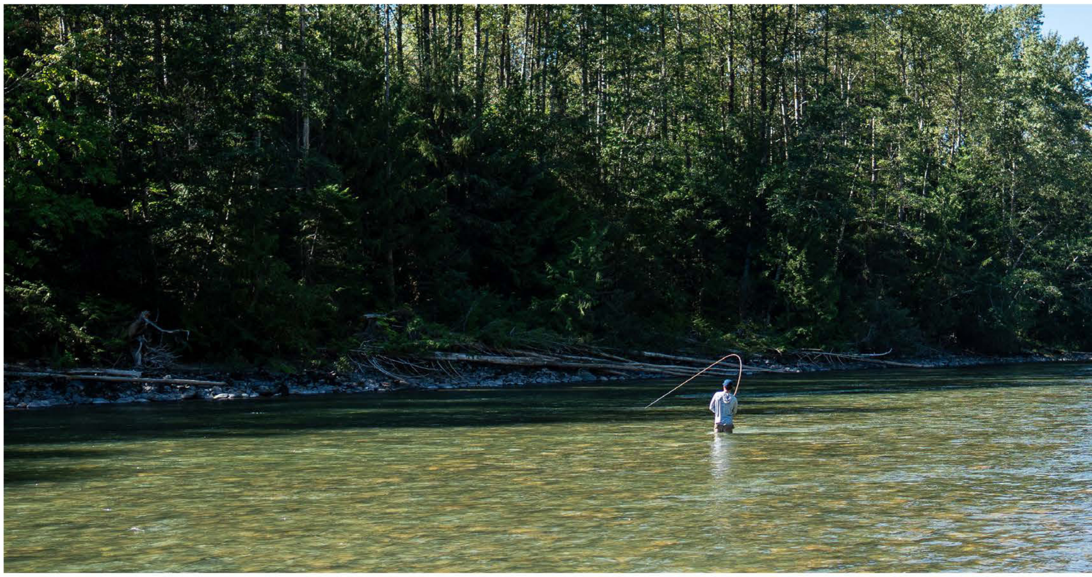
LESSONS

Summer Swinging

Story and photos by George Revel



The shade line pays off again for Cole Barlow.

My first steelhead on the swing still replays in my mind today. The scene opens on a hot July day.

I cast a black Woolly Bugger into a shady spot on the Trinity River. As soon as the fly swings into the sun, a silver torpedo shoots out from the shade and smashes the fly. Cartwheels and long runs follow until I finally hold the fish in the water, stunned in disbelief.

"Fish of a thousand casts!" I had always heard, but this was only my third cast of the day. This stroke of luck marked the beginning of a lifelong obsession with steelhead, spanning across three countries and four states and killing more than one relationship. Twenty years later and thousands of hours spent swinging for steelhead, and nearly every lesson was learned right there in my very first experience. Just go, it's easy.

You can fish for steelhead every month of the year, but the purest joy I've found is during the wet-wading months of July throught October. If there's a more enjoyable fishing experience than this, I haven't found it. If you are just embarking on your steelhead journey, I hope you realize the impending good fortune that awaits.

Steelhead are imperiled, so we must take special precautions when handling and fishing for them.

- Use a tippet of the appropriate size. No reason to go below 12-pound when swinging.
- Do not handle them with gloves.
- Keep the fish wet–there is no reason to remove them from the water.
- Use a net and don't beach the fish.
- Pinch your barbs.
- Follow all regulations.
- Be active in steelhead conservation.
- Avoid fishing in water temperatures above 68 degrees.

UNDERSTANDING SUMMER-RUN STEELHEAD

Steelhead are a mysterious fish and their life histories are often misunderstood by anglers. During the summer months, ocean-fresh, chrome-bright, summer-run steelhead generally migrate up long river systems flowing from headwaters that lie far inland. This marks the beginning of a months-long journey, sometimes over hundreds of miles, during which steelhead over-winter in the river system until they spawn in the spring. On their way upriver, fish generally maintain their oceanic tendencies by traveling in pods.

> *I love imagining the path the fish will take on their upriver journey, filtering into a run, resting, and continuing upstream.*

Typically, they look for deeper, slower pools near tributaries to spend the winter. Like any anadromous fish, it's more desirable to catch them closer in time and proximity to the ocean, while they are on the move. However, due to the long time they spend in freshwater, summer-run steelies are available to the angler for a longer period of time, with June through November being the main season. Once cold weather really kicks in, it's better to go search for fresh winter steel—a topic for another time.

The juvenile fish spend anywhere from one to three years in the river before migrating to the ocean, where they may spend an additional one to three years (or more) before returning to their natal stream.

SWINGING FOR SUMMER STEELHEAD

Fly fishing for steelhead may seem complex, but the reality is, it's pretty simple. Steelhead are not hard to catch, they are just hard to find. There is

Dustin Revel with a thick summer run buck.

no "match the hatch," no 6X tippet, no size-20 flies, and no complicated rigs that require spending 20 minutes tying. Often, you don't even need to mend! The following maxims and tips will help you achieve success when fishing for summer steelhead.

IDENTIFY HOLDING WATER

If you are coming from the trout world, keep in mind good trout water is not necessarily good steelhead water. Steelhead are seeking a place to rest on their journey upstream. When targeting steelhead, think about the path of least resistance. Obstacles like heavy rapids may cause fish to congregate above and below. Sections of the river that are flat, with subsurface structure, often provide restful places. There are three main parts of steelhead water that we target: the head, the gut, and the tailout.

The head of the run can be very productive, especially midday when the sun is high. While the water may appear to be raging, the drop-off in gradient creates a pocket of soft water below the surface. The broken surface caused by the turbulence not only oxygenates the water, but also deflects the bright sun, creating a more likely scenario for the fish to see your fly. Additionally, broken water makes fish more invisible to winged predators flying overhead. I like to imagine the fish nosed right up into the drop-off in the soft water below the fast water. Start high in the riffle with short casts and work your way down until you get to the gut of the run. Make sure that you allow your fly to finish the swing, into the soft water on the inside.

Guide Tom Mahan's go-to summer bug.

The gut of the run is where the current becomes less condensed and broadens out. This is where you can start to lengthen your cast out a bit and achieve a good, long swing. As you lengthen your line, fish from a fixed position to make sure you are covering the water. Once you've achieved your maximum casting distance, begin methodically moving down river between swings. Here, you start to take bigger steps and cover water faster, provided you have good water clarity. If I notice some particularly juicy water with large boulders, I tend to slow down and fish more methodically, while fishing faster through the less appealing

Midday fly poker to pass the time when the fishing is slow.

areas. As you get toward the bottom of the run, or the tailout, you can start to really lengthen out your cast.

The tailout is the place to really show off your cast and stretch out. It is often the widest part of the run. Again, the water may look fast, but fish love to hang here. Make sure you fish your fly all the way back into the choppy bits as the tailout breaks into the head of the next riffle.

GEAR

My preferred summer steelhead rod ranges from a 4-weight trout Spey on the upper reaches of the Klamath and Trinity, to a 7-weight 13-foot rod for impressive fish in northern British Columbia. Both Skagit and Scandi style lines have a place in the summer steelheader's quiver. Ideally, you'd have one rod rigged up with a Skagit line and sink tip and another rod with floating Scandi line and 12-foot leader for skating a dry fly—though the snobbiest of summer steelhead anglers would not stoop to throwing a sink tip during the summer run.

CASTS

Having a stealthy cast is essential when targeting summer steelhead in low, clear water. You want to cast in a way that allows your leader to extend fully while not ripping on the water's surface during the setup or smashing down on delivery. Often, a straight-line cast quartered downstream will do the trick. My preferred casts when targeting summer steelhead are the Snake Roll and Single Spey. They offer incredible power and control with minimal setup noise on the water when compared to the Snap T or Double Spey. Additionally, these two "touch-and-go" casts are more time efficient and allow you to cover more water during a fishing session.

TIME OF DAY—SUN AND SHADE

I prefer fishing mornings and evenings, when the sun is at a low angle and not directly overhead. Steelhead are generally more comfortable and willing to take a fly in lower light conditions. During summer, however, we don't always have that luxury.

I recommend a few strategies for targeting fish in the full sun. In the middle of the day, fishing a sink tip in the head and gut of the run can produce some great fish. Another strategy I employ in bright sun is fishing a fly with some flash that pushes water, for example, a Muddler variant with some flashy tinsel on the body. Lastly, find what shade IS available. A good summer steelhead guide will know what time runs are going to be shaded. All my summer steelhead notes record when the sun comes off the water on different runs. A note in my summer steelhead journal might read, "8/12/2024 Sandy Beach Run, Trinity River 4:15 pm shaded." The reality, though, is you will typically find your best fishing in the first light and last light of the day. So, don't burn yourself out by fishing all day in the hot summer sun—take a nap and make the most of the early morning and evening windows.

A GRAB OR A BOIL

The key here is to do very little when a fish grabs. Keep the rod tip pointed at the fish and wait until the fish turns and pulls line off the reel. Gently lift the rod toward the bank to try and bury the fly in the corner of the fish's mouth.

It is common, when fishing dry flies, for a fish to miss the fly—an exciting event indicating you have found a player. All is not lost if this happens. Standard operating procedure is to recall the cast you just made and note your position in the river. First step: walk three or four casts back upstream and begin the process of fishing back down to the fish. Often, allowing the fish some time to reset to its position is enough to elicit a second grab. If that doesn't do the trick, changing to a smaller fly or one that rides just below the surface, like a Muddler, can be enough to entice the fish into another attempt to hang itself on the end of your line.

SUMMER STEELHEAD RIVERS

We are lucky here in California to have access to two incredible summer-run steelhead fisheries—the Klamath River and Trinity River. Just over the California border lie the Rogue and the North Umpqua, one of the most legendary summer-run fisheries in the world. Add to that, our

Central Valley rivers, like the Feather, American and Lower Sacramento, which offer enough steelhead fishing to keep you busy when you can't make a longer trek north.

GEORGE'S FAVORITE SUMMER STEELHEAD FLIES

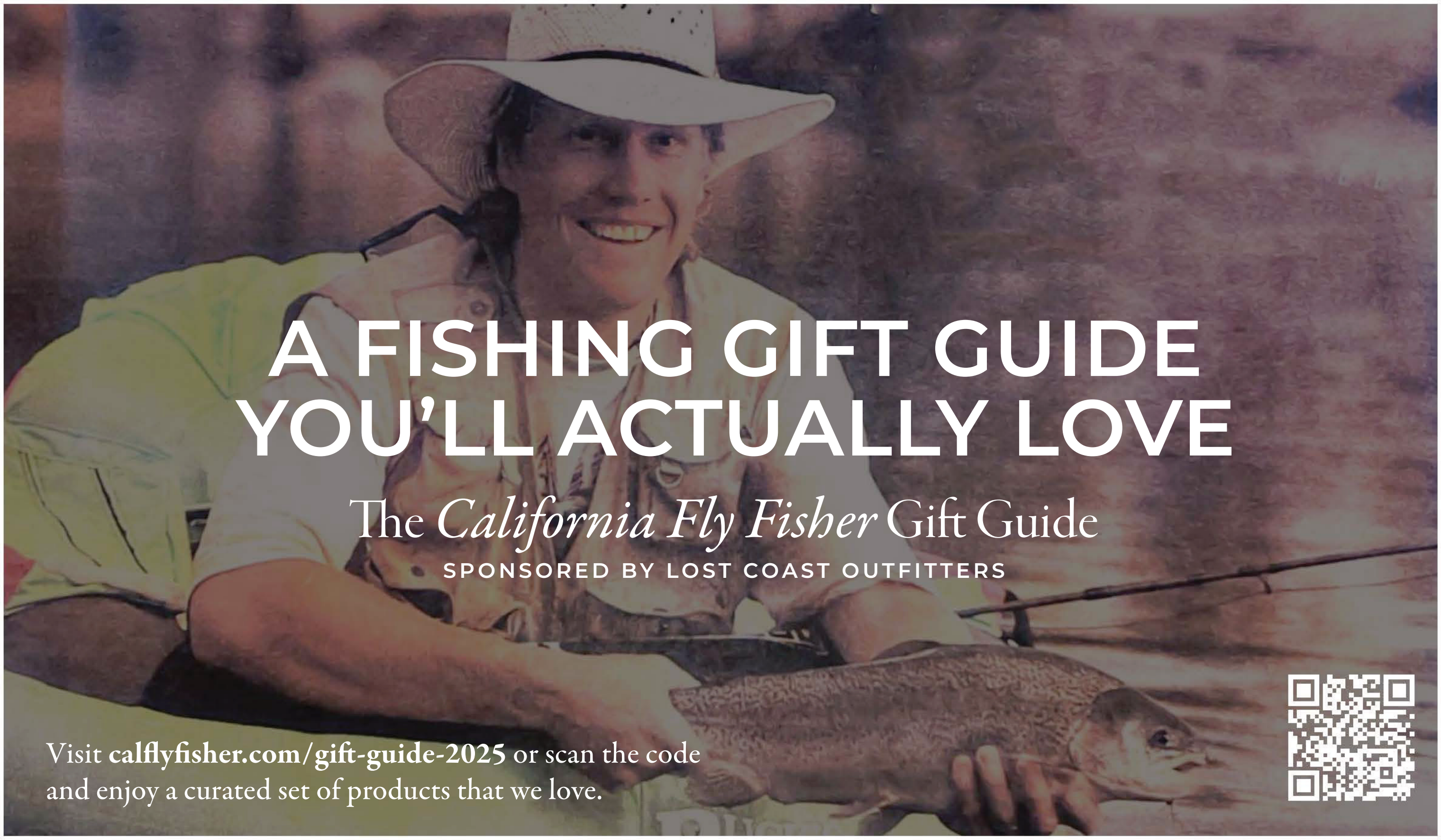
Concerning flies, I don't think what fly you use matters much, as long as it is one of these:

- A good skater: #5 Brett's Klamath Skater (October Caddis color is money)
- A waking fly for in the surface film: #6 Muddler Minnow
- A grease line fly: #6 Silver Hilton
- Something buggy: #6 Brindle Bug
- Something flashy: #5 Wedeking Jayhawker
- Sub-Surface: Burnt Chicken in black
- Check out our summer steelhead fly six-pack at LostCoastOutfitters.com

FINAL THOUGHTS

Swinging flies for summer-run steelhead is not about numbers—no steelhead fishing is. It's about the boil on a dry fly, the surge of a fish cartwheeling downstream, the way first light filters over the ridge, intercepting a pod of hot fish, t-shirts and sunscreen and maybe most importantly, wet wading... sorry wader companies.

Getting boats ready for the day's Dean River float.



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POEM

Reverence for the Steelhead

By Steve Zovickian

Chrome beast, plump with eggs,
What dark waters have you seen?
I've waited three years
since you tumbled down this stream
to that open sea,
to start your thousand mile swim.
Chrome beast, plump with eggs,
Now scented freshets guide you
to the gravel beds
where your destiny began.
Lay your eggs. Then leave, again.

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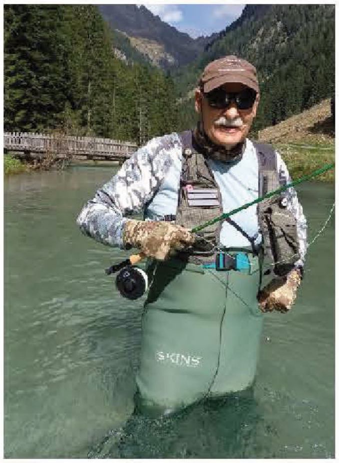

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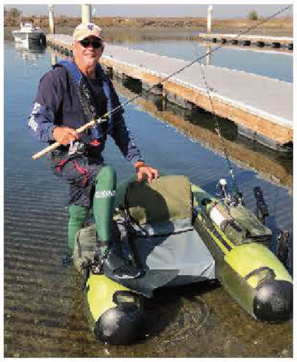
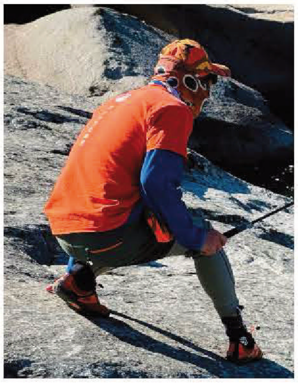
For more information contact the founder Ron Beltramo at RJBeltramo@aol.com or go to the website at

WWW.WADERSKINS.COM





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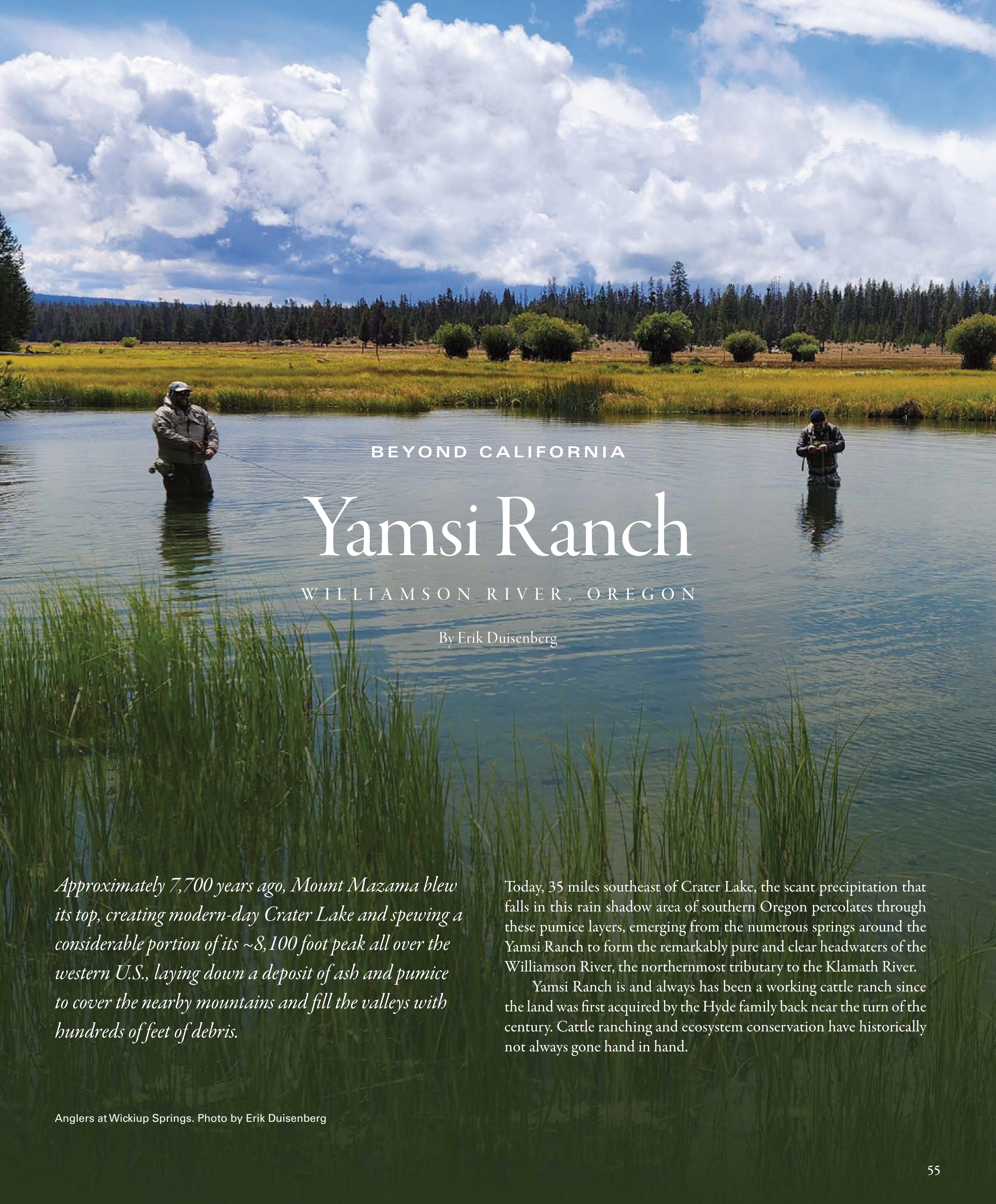

BEYOND CALIFORNIA

Yamsi Ranch

WILLIAMSON RIVER, OREGON

By Erik Duisenberg

Approximately 7,700 years ago, Mount Mazama blew its top, creating modern-day Crater Lake and spewing a considerable portion of its ~8,100 foot peak all over the western U.S., laying down a deposit of ash and pumice to cover the nearby mountains and fill the valleys with hundreds of feet of debris.

Today, 35 miles southeast of Crater Lake, the scant precipitation that falls in this rain shadow area of southern Oregon percolates through these pumice layers, emerging from the numerous springs around the Yamsi Ranch to form the remarkably pure and clear headwaters of the Williamson River, the northernmost tributary to the Klamath River.

Yamsi Ranch is and always has been a working cattle ranch since the land was first acquired by the Hyde family back near the turn of the century. Cattle ranching and ecosystem conservation have historically not always gone hand in hand.

Anglers at Wickiup Springs. Photo by Erik Duisenberg

Patrick prospecting at Lunker Lane. Photo by Erik Duisenberg

Irrigation, access to water, and the grazing needs of large herds of cattle have often been at odds with environmental movements. This is changing slowly, but the acknowledgment that an ecosystem in balance is superior to one that favors one factor over another has become more prevalent lately. Just a Google search with the terms "ranching" and "conservation" gives numerous results of public and private organizations, as well as individuals promoting the benefits and success stories of bringing these groups together.

Although they may not have realized it at the time, the Hyde family were early pioneers in viewing their land from a big-picture perspective, balancing the needs of their herd with the health of the environment. While the cattle business was what paid the bills, the early Hyde generations passed down a strong appreciation for the balance between domesticated cattle and the other animals and plants sharing their land. Early stories of the ranch are filled with angry bankers' ire at efforts that didn't always maximize herd yields but instead diverted money, time, and other resources to maintaining and improving the natural habitat or repairing accidental damage caused by cattle operations. Tales of raising, moving, branding, and feeding cattle are interspersed with stories of rescuing hawks, deer, elk, and sandhill crane eggs, which then hatched, imprinted, and followed the Hydes around for years like strange, 5-foot-tall ranch dogs.

More recently, the Hydes began formalizing the practice promoted by the Savoy Institute and their Holistic Management program. Although the program has several components, the most prominent is using cattle as tools to restore grasslands by grazing herds in fields for a short, intensive period before moving them on. Ideally, this rotation mimics the natural balance of these grasslands, between plant growth and the historical grazing patterns of deer and elk, leading to healthy grass and ecosystems without relying on resource-intensive or artificial techniques.

Now, as the fourth and fifth generations of Hydes grow into their roles as land stewards, the years of careful management and effort are evident throughout the Ranch, especially along the river. From the headwaters near the Ranch HQ at just under 5,000 feet in elevation, the Williamson winds clean and pure back and forth down the ranch at a consistent 42 degrees, flowing north and out the bottom of the property before turning west into the Klamath Marsh and eventually into Upper Klamath Lake, where it ultimately flows into the Klamath River. The Hydes have dedicated years carrying on their legacy of habitat improvement, adding the occasional deadfall or boulder to provide cover for fish and installing electric fences to protect the streambed from cattle. These efforts have paid off, as the nearly seven miles of river on the ranch support incredible numbers of brook trout, said to be the biggest in Oregon, along with the heralded Great Basin redband trout.

Twelve of us from the San Francisco Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club made the trip up to the ranch, northeast of Klamath Falls, in mid-August this year. Leaving early Thursday morning from the North Bay to handle the roughly six-hour drive, we arrived at Yamsi early in the afternoon, where we were greeted by Tom Hyde, his wife Leanne, and their two children. After the inevitable unburdening of vehicles into absurd piles of gear on the deck and a quick costume change, we loaded back up to take the five-mile dirt road trek to the river's bottom for an evening of fishing.

The bottom of the river can be a little disorienting. You're looking at a beautiful touch of river to your left, curving away to disappear around a bend. To your right, down river and looking north, there is a bench and fence line about 200 yards away, which marks the end of the property. It's necessary to spend some time exploring to wrap your head around the idea that between you and that bench lies a mile and a half of winding river, including bends, holes, straights, undercut banks, deadfalls, and boulders—all ridiculous fishing spots. Should you get tired of this bounty, there are roughly six-plus miles of river upstream with similar characteristics to keep you interested.

We scrambled to rig up, orient ourselves to the challenge ahead, and spread out on the meadow. As is common on most fishing trips, the first moments on the river involve some education. This includes a bit of orientation, an acknowledgment of what the river presents, a recognition of the challenge ahead, and an anticipation of the problem-solving needed for the days to come. We fumbled through different solutions until dark, then hustled back to the ranch for a home-cooked meal served by the Hydes in the iconic building that is the ranch headquarters.

Sitting in the old ranch house, post gut-busting dinner, beverages topped off, we got serious. After all, between the bunch of us, there had to be a decent fisherman somewhere. With another round of libations, some shared tips, tricks, and gear adjustments, we formulated a plan. The strategy included getting up with the Hydes, breakfast, swilling plenty of coffee to shake off the night's excesses, and heading back down to the bottom of the property to dig in.

During the planning stages, we had hoped to time our trip to the end of the hopper season, a special time of year after the early bugs and Hex hatch, but before the late-season October caddis and mahogany duns. When the hopper activity is on, the Williamson shifts into an absurd cast-one, catch-one mode, like a goofy video game. However, the timing of the hopper season depends on water levels, air temperature, and the number of cold days peppering the summer months.

The short story is we missed it. A healthy winter and plentiful early-season sunshine have been a boon to the grasses and plant life, ideally creating perfect conditions for hoppers. However, this year the high grass in the river channel further downriver has actually impeded the flow, causing water to back up and flood the fields as much as knee deep.

Bad news for hoppers, great news for fish who were no longer limited to their customary holes and hiding spots and could feed on the plentiful food sources. High water doesn't mean faster water, and besides making a walk across the meadow more aerobic than before, it might have improved the fishing since the fish are now everywhere in the river.

Motivated by the previous night's heroics and an incredible breakfast served up by the Hydes, we dove into the bottom of the ranch mid-morning. Understanding that hoppers weren't the premium, we expanded our options to anything in the fly box.

As it turns out, everything worked. Over the next three days, hoppers worked. In many flavors. PMDs worked. Elk hair caddis worked when there wasn't a caddis within three counties. Scuds dredged through a pool worked. A small leech with a slow retrieve worked. Want to throw a chubby with the ugliest dropper in your flybox? That would work. A Parachute Adams in sizes 16, 18, or 20 with a dark belly? Works. My floating black ant didn't float so well, but still worked. I don't know if anyone in our group got around to throwing beetles, bees, or mouse patterns, but I suspect they would have worked too. Russ swore by his Turk's Tarantula pattern. Alan spent three days throwing hoppers in multiple patterns and never failed to produce. Mike and I beat up the "Sucker Hole" with everything in our fly box. It's unclear if the hole is named for the dumb fish or the returning fisherman, but Mike pulled at least six of the most stubborn surface-feeding fish out of that hole.

The Williamson this year has an incredible number of hungry fish per mile. Since the river runs back and across the meadow, there's plenty of opportunity to connect with your trip mates. If you prefer to fish solo, with nobody around in a beautiful setting, catching fish and enjoying the Williamson at your leisure, there are miles of river to explore. If you want to fish shoulder to shoulder with your buddies, to celebrate their catches, and laugh at their misses, that's available too. Mostly, we chose the latter, with the associated adjustments in vocabulary appropriate for the occasion and an occasional nip from the flask. The only other constant during our trip was Chef Leanne Hyde's efforts to fatten us up regularly for what must be some future culling or impending apocalypse.

Not to imply that the Williamson is an easy fishing river, but in fact, it's incredibly technical. While the fish don't seem to be terribly concerned with actual fly colors or maybe size, fly behavior and action are critical. The Upper Williamson is gin clear and slow-moving, so sneaking up on holes is advantageous. Several times, I crept up to a hole thinking I was in a perfect position, only to watch 15 fish scatter before me as my head cleared the grass, revealing the absurdity of my approach. Long, gentle presentations and long drifts are the norm. The almost universal mantra that a "drag-free drift" as the pinnacle of fly dry fly fishing holds true. Except when it doesn't. A dry fly presented cleanly on top might not get a bite, but what we started to call the "Yamsi Twitch"—a clean presentation and drift, followed by a slight pull or shake of the rod to give the fly a little action like a dying bug, followed by a quick retrieve would often result in an aggressive strike somewhere in there where a straight drift yielded no results.

It took us a while to understand the big picture. All of us experienced some period of no activity, which was inevitably followed by an abundance of hungry fish. Over the next few days, as Leanne overserved us with incredible calories during the meals, guidance from Tom Hyde and his son Caden, a bit of trial and error, and a few facepalm-worthy moments of stupidity, we reached a point where we could understand parts of the Williamson and the amazing fish that live there.

Yamsi Ranch

Yamsi Ranch has been a working cattle rach since the turn of the century.
Photo by Thomas Knoble

I know Jeff won the ugly fly contest and took a bit of our money. But in the end, I'm not sure how many big brookies I caught, along with some of those beautiful rainbows. I don't know how many fish our group caught, but judging by the number and frequency of yelps across the meadow, I can only guess. I don't know who caught the biggest fish, although Adam seemed to have a run-in with an 18-inch brookie, and Patrick documented his 21-inch rainbow with a picture. I don't know how many fish were caught on dries, or on leeches, or hoppers, or nymphs. I'm not sure who caught the first fish. Or the last. But I didn't hear a bad fishing report from anyone, whether they were fishing solo or with the peanut gallery. I do know that everyone in the group wants to be on the short list to return next year. I'm not surprised, but that's gotta count for something.

The nearly seven miles of river on the ranch support incredible numbers of brook trout, said to be the biggest in Oregon, along with the heralded Great Basin redband trout.
Photo by Tom Hyde

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

Putah Creek

By Lance Gray

Putah Creek flows thorugh runs, riffles, and moss-covered boulders, a fly fisher's dream. Photo by Phil Reedy

Folklore surrounds it. Famous singers have sung about it, writers have put pen to paper over it, and anglers have long flocked to it.

It even has its own online forum, and everyone who fishes there either leaves in frustration or with glory. This isn't Hot Creek, Fall River, or the Pit—it's not even the Lower Sacramento. This is a small tailwater fishery named centuries ago by Spaniards as Arroyo de los Putos, also known as Putah Creek.

Just west of Winters, California, nestled in the scenic foothills, this creek has inspired both song and story. John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival vacationed here as a young boy and later revealed that his hit "Green River" was about Putah Creek, where, as he wrote, "barefoot girls dancin' in the moonlight" really did exist.

FROM MONTICELLO TO TAILWATER

The creek was forever changed in 1957 with the construction of Monticello Dam by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The dam flooded the turn-of-the-century community of Monticello, forming Lake Berryessa and transforming this once seasonal stream into a tailwater with continuous cold-water flows. Today, the tailwater runs about 8.1 miles downstream into Lake Solano, where much of its water is diverted for Solano County use.

For years, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) stocked rainbow and brown trout here. But a lawsuit brought a few decades ago by the Center for Biological Diversity halted the practice of planting hatchery with wild fish, allowing wild fish to take over. Now, Putah supports a thriving population of naturally reproducing trout—some pan-sized, others large trophies. The creek is officially designated as part of CDFW's Heritage and Wild Trout Program.

A FLY FISHER'S DREAM

Putah Creek flows through runs, riffles, and moss-covered boulders, blending the feel of both freestone and spring creek— classic water, a fly fisher's dream. Wild fish thrive here, and the formidable trout have earned widespread admiration among many fly-fishing enthusiasts.

The average temperature hovers around 55 degrees farenheit, with flows that allow the wild trout to flourish. In summer, flows often reach 1,000 cubic feet per second; in winter, they drop closer to 100 cfs. In 2025, however, flows have been lower than average, around 625 cfs.

Putah Creek boasts a large and diverse range of aquatic insects. It hosts caddisflies, mayflies, stoneflies, worms, and midges. Many folks fish midges exclusively. While this method yields fish year-round, an angler who carries a wider selection of flies will outperform those who only use midges. Tailwaters are always loaded with aquatic insects. You can travel along the creek and witness a mayfly hatch in one spot and a caddis hatch 500 yards downstream. Therefore, the angler must carry a variety of flies in their box. Don't forget about streamers and egg patterns. Sculpins, small rainbow fry, terrestrials, crayfish patterns, and various eggs all attract fish at Putah.

One of my best days on Putah came a couple of years ago when I was high-sticking three flies through several riffles. I fished a mayfly and a midge, with a Barr's Slumpbuster Olive Sculpin as my point fly. As I high sticked the water, I let my leader swing up and across at the end of the drift. Nearly all of the two dozen fish I landed that day ate the Slumpbuster.

ACCESS AND WADING

Public access is one of Putah's greatest assets. Yolo County maintains six parks along the creek, complete with trails, restrooms, and picnic tables, though some facilities are still under repair from the record 2017 floods, when flows surged past 9,000 cfs. Before heading out, check with Yolo County Parks for updates.

Flows are highest in summer, averaging between 600 and 1,000 cfs, fluctuating based on how much water is needed in the Solano Valley. During fall and winter, flows drop to around 65 to 200 cfs, when large storms create temporary spikes.

There is no bad time to fish the creek, especially if you're a good and steady wader (see "The Art of Wading Well," by Dick Galland in the Summer 2025 issue). The fall and winter flows are easier for most waders to wade through the creek. The rocks are still slick with moss, so you'll need good boots and a sturdy wading staff.

Putah Creek is open to fishing all year long. However, fish spawn in the creek during the fall months, and many anglers voluntarily avoid fishing from November through February. During the pre-spawn months, large trout will be moving out of the deeper, colder runs to get to spawning areas in the creek. These fish are packing on the calories to get ready for the spawn, so it's a great time to fish large flies such as soft-shell crayfish and sculpins. The crayfish are also spawning during this time, and small male crayfish are prime targets for big rainbows.

During the spawn itself, anglers should leave the larger fish undisturbed, targeting instead the smaller fish downstream that are looking to eat the aquatic insects and eggs being released from these spawning giants.

Post-spawn, the fish feed ravenously, making spring an excellent time to visit. Fish are trying to regain calories lost during winter, and springtime offers a wide variety of food, including baby crayfish, sculpins, midges, stones, and caddis flies. Everywhere in the creek, things are waking up, and fish are feeding on the hatching insects. I prefer springtime fishing and am always mindful of storms and large runoffs, especially if we're fortunate enough to receive a lot of water.

THE NUMBER 3 ACCESS AREA

Perhaps the most popular stretch is Yolo County's Number 3 Access, about 600 yards long, stretching from the Guide's Hole to the downstream fork at Island Riffle. With pocket water, deep runs, shaded channels, and cooler temps, it consistently holds fish. Easy trails and multiple water access points make it a favorite, and it is usually where I direct people to fish.

In this area, I like to wade and get close to the spots where I know fish tend to hold, using a high stick or Euro rig to reach all the nooks and crannies. Instead of adding weight, I adjust depth by raising or lowering my rod tip. I also like to give the fish a "buffet" of flies to choose from. I almost always fish three flies—from midges to sculpins—and only change when I spot a hatch or anticipate one about to happen. Confidence is key; the more you fish, the more faith you'll have in your flies and your approach.

Norm Takemori with a large Putah Creek female pre-spawn. Photo by Lance Gray

For rigging, I favor the Rio Euro leader; it works great. First, I tie on my tippet from the tippet ring, and then I use a dropper method to tie on my flies. I prefer to fish flies off the central leader at 90-degree angles.

FLY SELECTION

I pick my flies based on light and conditions. On overcast days, I fish darker flies like a black WD40. On bright days, I go lighter, perhaps a gray WD40. Anticipated hatches also guide selection—caddis on warm afternoons, mayflies when cooler. The lightest of all the flies is my first fly, and the heaviest is the point or terminal fly. I've been fishing my favorite flies on Putah Creek for years, decades in some accounts. They still work, and I still fish them. On the list are:

- *Midges:* Jigged midges (black or red, #18–20)
- *Mayflies:* Lance's X-May Perdigon (light or brown, #18–20); Hogan's S&M (olive or brown, #16–18); Doug's Peaches & Cream (#16–18)
- *Caddis:* Thurman's Jigged Bird's Nest Peaches & Cream (#18); Fox's Micro Poopah (green, #16)
- *General:* WD40 (black or gray, #18–22)
- *Point flies/streamers:* Barr's Slumpbuster (olive, #8); Mercer's Poxyback Crayfish (#8)

My Putah Creek box is packed with many flies so that I can match the hatch quickly. Remember, folks, Putah Creek is a tailwater fishery, and multiple hatches can occur simultaneously. Adaptability and observation separate the good days from the great ones.

DESTINATION

A Guide's Perspective on Putah Creek

By Johnny Feaster

Nestled in the rolling golden hills of Northern California, just outside the Bay Area, lies the small town of Winters.

Spring and fall are prime fishing seasons on Putah creek. Photo by Phil Reedy

There, situated along the unique tailwater of Lake Berryessa, is Putah Creek. With Northern California's vast network of streams, rivers, and tributaries, the longer you spend here, the easier it becomes to lose yourself in the state's natural beauty. Having grown up just down the road, I've been fortunate to have some of the best fisheries right in my backyard. Putah Creek, in particular, has been a constant in my life and continues to surprise me—especially after delving into its rich history. Despite being a relatively small fishery, it holds remarkable depth, and even the most seasoned anglers are often caught off guard by what it offers.

Looking back at the history of Winters, the land was originally home to the Patwin Village of Native Americans. Interestingly, the name "Putah" originates from the town of "Putato," not from the Spanish word, as many assume, and was situated between Winters and Davis. Over the years, Putah Creek has been rerouted twice since the 1850s, with the most notable alteration bringing the creek closer to Davis and creating what is now known as the South Fork of Putah Creek. Despite these modifications, we can still observe some original species, such as King Salmon, which continue to pass through today. However, the agricultural dam has limited the salmon's access to their historic spawning grounds.

What I'm most passionate about sharing, is how steelhead once thrived in this valley before the construction of the Monticello Dam on Lake Berryessa, between 1953 and 1956. During that time, wild trout (steelhead?) followed the salmon into the system. After the dam's completion, these fish were effectively landlocked, and I believe this is part of what makes Putah Creek's fishery so special today. The genetic legacy of those steelhead continues to run through the creek, influencing the behavior and characteristics of the fish we see now. Spring and fall tend to be the prime fishing seasons because these fish still carry the instinctual drive to spawn, much like their steelhead ancestors did in nearby Lake Solano Creek.

To me, Putah Creek stands out from any other water system. Its challenges and its highs and lows all come full circle in a way that is unique to this place. Given the creek's relatively small size, it's important to remember that every angler out there hopes for their best day. There are countless reasons why people fish, and each one matters. It's not just about respecting the fish—it's about respecting one another, too.

To truly respect Putah Creek is to respect the winter closure—it's essential for ensuring the long-term health of the system. I've witnessed the creek's ups and downs firsthand, and I can tell you from experience:

The closure is effective. When the closure is in effect, fish have a safe environment with low flows and can spawn in clear, undisturbed beds. During this time, there's significantly less disturbance from anglers, allowing fish to carry out their natural processes without added stress. The beds, often overlooked by waders or anglers, are given a chance to recover, supporting the growth of the next generation.

As a 12th-generation Californian, my family's deep ties to the state's history have always been a guiding force in my life. The stories of those who built the foundation before us have shaped my understanding of the importance of remembering our origins. Growing up in Vacaville, I was fortunate enough to spend much of my childhood and early adulthood at Lake Berryessa and Putah Creek. Fishing became more than just a hobby—it became a lifelong passion.

I have fond memories of trolling for trout with my father on Lake Berryessa, passing by Putah Creek without knowing just how much it would come to influence my life in the years ahead. Now, as a full-time fishing guide, Putah Creek holds a special place in my heart. It was my entry point into the world of fly fishing. It was the first place that taught me how to cast a line, and unknowingly, how to embrace the challenges of fly fishing.

For me, fishing Putah Creek laid the foundation for my understanding of trout fishing. In my early days, I didn't even know what a back cast was. But learning on this system gave me the confidence to fish anywhere. Each trip to Putah brought new lessons, and it's been a privilege to pass those lessons on as a guide.

What makes Putah Creek such a treasure isn't just its natural beauty—it's the dedicated efforts of organizations like the Putah Creek Council and individuals who care deeply about its future. The anglers who voluntarily set down their rods during the winter to allow the wild rainbows a chance to spawn have played a crucial role in preserving the creek's health. The more I've learned about Putah Creek's history, the more I understand why it has earned its reputation as a world-class fishing destination.

As a local guide, I've seen the creek's health fluctuate over the years, facing both challenges and triumphs. I'm proud to share that the closure efforts have been successful. For my family, protecting the legacies of those who helped shape our community is at the core of who we are. I often reflect on the pioneers—groups like the Putah Creek Trout and Council—who dedicated themselves to protecting Putah Creek. These are just a few of the many passionate individuals whose hard work has helped ensure that this vital ecosystem remains strong.

I will keep advocating for Putah Creek—not just for today's anglers, but for future generations as well. I want my son and daughter to experience the same natural beauty and rich fishing heritage that have shaped my life. The legacy of Putah Creek is one that will endure, and I'm honored to be part of its ongoing story. As always, if you see me on the water, don't forget to say hi!

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THE GOOD FIGHT

The California Golden Trout Rush

By Sabrina Sugg

Photos by Josh Duplechian

The California Golden Trout's endemic range is within the Kern River watershed's tiny headwater streams flowing through high-elevation meadows in the Southern Sierra Nevada Mountains.

TU's Jessica Strickland drifts a dry fly to rising golden trout far into the Sierra Nevada backcountry.

The history of the United States is filled with harrowing tales of revolt, wealth, and competition — for better or for worse. One such story that has found a home in the pages of every middle school U.S. history textbook is of the California Gold Rush. Facilitating Westward Expansion in the mid-1800s, the Gold Rush brought Anglo settlers and their livestock to an area previously populated only by Indigenous peoples. As the settlers scoured the Sierra Nevada goldfields, their livestock overgrazed the flat plains and meadows that both held cultural significance to the Indigenous peoples and provided important functions for the ecosystem. Textbooks rarely mention the cultural consequences of Westward Expansion, and they often fail entirely to mention the environmental consequences.

Unbeknownst to the inhabitants of the Sierra Nevada at the time, there was something else of great importance residing within the rivers and streams: the golden trout. 10,000 years ago, volcanic flows isolated a few tributaries within the Kern River of the southern Sierra Nevada, causing golden trout to diverge from the rainbow trout lineage (See the "Forks of Kern Field Note" in the Summer 2025 issue). This new species preferred the cold, clear mountain streams in highly elevated meadows, adapting its scales to a golden color matching the stream's decomposed granite. Over time, the golden trout, native to those few tributaries, were moved farther north by humans both accidentally and intentionally. The fish gained a 600-square-mile home range and flourished in their new habitats, garnering designation as the official state fish by the California State Legislature almost a century after the Gold Rush and earning its spot on almost every California angler's bucket list.

Yet, this is simply where the story of the California golden trout begins. By the end of the 1900s, the long-term effects of Westward Expansion—habitat loss, over-harvesting of fish, hybridization with stocked non-native trout species—compounded by the growing impact of climate change, saw the trout populations begin to decrease. In the early 2000s, it was clear that the species would soon reach a critical level of concern, so a conservation strategy was devised by the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to prevent the extinction of California's state fish. A key part of that strategy was stream and meadow restoration, building on the Inyo National Forest's legacy meadow restoration work that has been occurring on the Kern Plateau since as early as the 1950s.

IMPORTANCE OF MEADOWS

Although meadows only make up 1 percent of the Sierra Nevada landscape, they contain between 60-80 percent of its biodiversity. But, unfortunately, they're not in great shape. Around 50 percent of Sierra Nevada meadows are degraded and struggle to perform their critical functions for the state's water supply.

Healthy meadows act like a sponge by absorbing, storing, and filtering snowmelt from the mountains. The water percolates into the meadows and, during the summer months, the cooler, cleaner water is released downstream. In a degraded meadow, the springtime snowmelt simply runs off the landscape through eroded channels, effectively being lost instead of conserved. Healthy meadows even act as large carbon sinks, helping to decrease the amount of atmospheric greenhouse gases. Importantly, healthy meadows provide excellent refugia for trout, with late-season base flows providing cold, clean water, cold-water refuge and camouflage from riparian growth, and complex habitat for all trout life stages. Degraded meadows lack all of this, adding to the California golden trout's population decline.

GOLDEN TROUT PROJECT

Trout Unlimited's (TU) Golden Trout Project is responding by restoring meadows within the Sierra Nevada. Originating more than 15 years ago as a volunteer-run project, today the Golden Trout Project is a multi-partner, multi-million-dollar effort that has restored over 30 stream miles and 2,000 acres of headwater habitat in the South Fork Kern River Watershed, the California golden trout's home range.

The primary goal of meadow restoration is to slow down and spread out the springtime runoff, so it has time to seep into the meadows. By using low-tech, process-based techniques, the Golden Trout Project focuses on reconnecting the stream channel to the meadow floodplain. The predominant restoration method involves inserting structures called post-assisted log structures, or beaver dam analogs (BDAs), into the streams to capture sediment and fill in the eroded channels. This pre-

TU staff use electrofishing equipment to count golden trout numbers in key locations.

vents the water from rushing through and further eroding entrenched channels that course through degraded meadow systems. The BDAs create a physical barrier, causing the water to lose energy, spread out over the meadows, soak into the ground, cool the water, and increase the amount of water released in the summer months. For the California golden trout, that means more deep pools and cool water flowing into the late summer months, while stabilizing water temperatures during the winter.

TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

Jessica Strickland, TU's California Inland Trout Program Director, identified the keys to the project's success to date: "Strong partnerships and diverse support." Long-term collaborations provide compelling stories to funding entities, Strickland elaborated, which made finding funding "extraordinarily successful." TU secured the majority of its funding for planning through the CDFW. Strickland expressed gratitude, stating, "This work would have never kicked off the ground without their trust and willingness to make the first financial investment."

The U.S. Forest Service is another key partner for the Golden Trout Project. With the majority of restoration efforts located in either designated Wilderness Areas, where no mechanized equipment is allowed, or remote National Forest areas with limited vehicular access, just getting to the sites required significant effort. All tools and equipment were trekked in on foot or carried by mules. Larger equipment was flown in by helicopter. Strickland expressed her appreciation for this partnership, saying, "U.S. Forest Service lands are managed for multiuse, and they have an overwhelming number of diverse projects on their docket. They chose to be champions for this work, and they didn't need to. I am so grateful to all of the staff who initiated support and continue to be part of our partnership."

According to Michael Wiese, the Inyo National Forest Watershed Program Manager, the Program's achievements to date have exceeded the objectives outlined in the Inyo National Forest's Land Management Plan (LMP). Signed in 2020, the LMP aimed to improve at least five meadows. Already, the Golden Trout Project has implemented meadow restoration work in 15 meadows. While those accomplishments are impressive, there is still much more to be done. TU plans to implement another 75 stream miles and 7,000 acres instream and meadow habitat restoration projects benefiting the California golden trout by 2030.

Elaborating on these partnerships, Gabriel Singer, Statewide Native and Threatened Trout Coordinator for the CDFW, stated "The key has been leaning on the strengths of each of the individual partners and working towards a common goal that we all passionately support: intact ecosystems capable of supporting resilient populations of healthy California golden trout." Meadow restoration benefits many California native species, beyond the golden trout. Singer specified that restoration provides habitat complexity, "allowing species to carve out niches where they can thrive."

Much of the Golden Trout Project's restoration work takes place in Wilderness and is done using hand tools.

Measuring streams before and after restoration work helps track the creation of pools, stream width, and improvements to riparian vegetation.

MEASUREMENTS OF SUCCESS

The Golden Trout Project places a large emphasis on monitoring the meadows before, during, and for the decade following restoration to ensure that its goals have been achieved. According to Strickland, the monitoring program served multiple purposes. TU aimed to confirm that its restoration efforts were delivering the expected benefits, while also tracking any unintended negative impacts. A key focus was evaluating the effectiveness of BDAs to help design better-informed projects in the future. The program also established metrics for assessing instream aquatic habitat conditions, water temperature, riparian and meadow vegetation, streamflow, groundwater levels, and the presence and abundance of fish and macroinvertebrates.

The positive impacts of TU's Golden Trout Project have extended far past the California golden trout. Tribes and communities within the Sierra Nevada support this project, and TU "hires up to 20 crew members every summer and implements a tribal youth work experience program," Strickland said. These work opportunities are economically impactful, as resources and jobs can be limited in the area. Wiese mentioned that the project also has "a positive impact on the local tourism, as it brings in anglers and other recreationists into the area to fish for golden trout and enjoy the natural beauty that a proper functioning meadow system provides on the landscape." Echoing Wiese's sentiments, Singer reminisced, saying "you can't replace the experience of catching one of these brightly colored fish with big parr marks, golden flanks, and red-orange bellies on a dry fly in a small stream running through a Sierra Nevada meadow at 9,000+ feet."

Although the Sierra Nevada may no longer be teeming with gold, its land and animals are still worthy of great admiration and care. The Golden Trout Project brings together groups that highly value the protection of wild spaces and their inhabitants. While there is still more work to be done, TU's efforts to protect California's state fish, one admired by anglers and conservationists alike, emphasize the importance of restoration.

A LIFE IN LINE

A Conversation with Conway Bowman

Interview and photos by Al Quattrocchi

Conway Bowman is a world-renowned saltwater fly fishing guide and pioneer of mako shark fly fishing. The San Diego native and co-host of "The Outfitters" has pushed the boundaries of what's possible with a fly rod, earning recognition as an Orvis-Endorsed guide, Yeti ambassador, and Costa-endorsed captain. From his early days casting Royal Coachmen for brook trout in Idaho's Stanley Basin to pursuing 800-pound makos off California's coast, Conway embodies the consummate angler's spirit. Here, his good friend and accomplished saltwater angler Al Quattrocchi—award-winning creative director, IGFA world record holder, and passionate surf guide from Los Angeles—sits down with Conway to explore his journey from backyard bass ponds to the ultimate apex predators of the Pacific.

We have been buddies for a long time. What impresses me about you is your passion for the sport of fly fishing. Whether you are throwing hoppers for carp, dry flies for trout, or half a chicken at a mako, you are always 100 percent in it; you are the consummate waterman and athlete. Your enthusiasm is infectious on and off the water. Were you always this way?

That's an interesting question. I've always thrown myself into my interests. Once I get locked in on something, I don't leave one stone unturned. For example, as a kid, I was so set on building a bass pond that one weekend I went out to my backyard with a shovel and a pick, dug a small pond that I lined with PVC lining, filled it with lily pads, put fish in it, and made the ultimate urban bass pond. My parents had that pond in their backyard for about five years. My parents let me follow my passions, which shaped my all-in approach to everything from fishing and hunting to skiing and spearfishing.

Do you remember your first fly-fishing experience as a kid and what you first caught?

My first fly fishing experience was as a child in Stanley, Idaho. My father, a schoolteacher, and I spent summers in Stanley thanks to friends who owned the Redfish Lake Lodge. At age six, I remember the first fish I caught on a fly at a place called Valley Creek. I remember my father put a royal coachman on an old Fenwick fiberglass Ferreira light rod. I made a very short cast along a grassy bank, and on that first cast, I caught a brook trout. That experience sparked my lifelong passion for fly fishing. For the next decade, my father and I fished all the wonderful rivers from Silver Creek and the Salmon River to Henry's Fork and every bit of water in between. That was a very magical time in my life that shaped me into the angler I am today.

Always a good idea to tighten hooks when they are attached to a rail cleat.

I know our buddy Nick Curcione was an early mentor and influencer in the world of fly fishing for sharks. Can you recall your first shark-on-the-fly experience?

Nick Curcione, the Godfather of saltwater fly fishing, introduced me to the activity and inspired my interest in pursuing mako sharks on a fly rod. While living in Southern California in the 70s, Nick pioneered fly fishing for makos. My first encounter with a mako on a fly rod came in the early 1990s. When I saw my first mako circling the boat, I was so in awe of this wonderful game fish. The power. The grace. The speed. Its businesslike disposition mesmerized me. I was so captivated that I didn't even cast to it. I just watched it circle the boat. The first mako I hooked took the fly right at the rod tip, sped away at 30 miles per hour, and leapt three times. At that moment, I realized I needed to target mako sharks exclusively.

I heard you once caught a mako shark off a kayak. Walk me through that insanity.

Oh yes, the kayak mako shark shit show! I was fishing with my good friend, Kirk Deeter, and a couple of buddies back in the early 2000s. Kirk thought it would be a good idea to bring a kayak along on the trip to see if we could catch a mako shark in a kayak. When the time came, we drew straws on the boat to see who would be unfortunate enough to hop in a kayak and catch a mako shark on a fly ride while in the kayak. I drew the shortest straw.

So, I jumped in the kayak and paddled out into the chum slick that we had set earlier. Thinking I would only have to cast to a small mako,

A seven-hundred-pound Mako goes airborne.

which were the only makos we had seen all day, I was confident that I could hook one from the kayak and successfully release it. Five minutes after hopping into the kayak, I see a giant dorsal fin cruising 40 feet in front of me. That was my mako! I made the cast while secretly hoping that what was beneath the dorsal fin was not going to take the fly. Of course, the mako shark immediately turned and ate the fly and started swimming towards Hawaii. At that point, I was in deep shit. I was in a kayak. I had zero leverage on a fish that was close to 300 pounds, and I was headed off to Hawaii. Oh, and I dropped my paddle while I was casting, and it floated away. The shark ran out with me in tow. All of a sudden, my line went slack, and I realized the shark was swimming right back at me. Right then, I saw the dorsal fin heading right for me. Now I have a 300-pound mako shark heading right back at my kayak, almost like it was hunting ME down. All I could hear was Kirk Deeter yelling, "We're going to come get you!" in a very panicked tone. As the shark approached, I tried to break the line. I could not. With 60-pound test as a leader, I couldn't get enough tension on the line to break it. The shark swam right up to my kayak and then sounded. My rod was fully bent over, and my kayak was starting to tip. There was no chance of my breaking this fish off. How was I going to release this shark? The fish sounded … 100 feet … 200 feet … 300 feet … and then slack. The shark broke off.

Thank God!

That's the end of the story.

How have you evolved as an angler since those early days in pursuit of these magnificent creatures? How has your tackle evolved, such as wire leader systems, flies, reels, and drag settings?

Well, obviously, I evolved, and the equipment has evolved.

A good example is that saltwater fly-fishing reels are a much better tool these days than they were 30 years ago. Better drag. Better line capacity. As for rods, I almost exclusively use 8.5-foot, one-piece custom rods. They're a combination of graphite and fiberglass. These rods cast large flies easily but also have the strength to fight a large mako in deeper water.

My fly selection has evolved as well. I use two flies 100 percent of the time. They are tube flies tied with foam, and they float on the surface and resemble some sort of seabird. The tube fly is great because I can use different-sized hooks depending on the size of the mako sharks I'm targeting. Also, the fight is great because it slides up the leader once the mako is hooked, and I get the fly back 95 percent of the time.

Observing mako sharks for over 30 years, I've developed a much higher respect for them. I appreciate it as a top predator in the ocean, a formidable game fish on the fly, and I am in awe of its strength and beauty. As an angler, it has helped me hone my skills in fighting big fish.

Most people may not realize the mako is the fastest fish in the ocean; they have been known to bite the tails off tuna. Explain what your reel sounds like after one eats the fly and decides to put it in overdrive?

Captain Conway Bowman.

The mako shark is, in my opinion, the fastest fish in the ocean.

It tracks and kills anything it wants, including tuna, swordfish, sailfish, and wahoo, all considered faster than a mako shark. When you hook a mako on a fly reel, it's hard to explain the speed and power of these fish as they're peeling off 300 to 400 yards of backing. The sound the reel makes is a high-pitched squeal.

The amazing thing is watching and hearing the fly line tear through the water. The beads of water flying off the line as it's tearing across the surface are truly something to witness. I cannot explain how powerful mako sharks are because they are just so powerful. People just have to experience it themselves.

But I'll tell you this, I've caught many great saltwater fish, and there's not one that rivals the power and strength of the mako shark.

Conservation is so important in protecting all pelagic species. What sort of catch and release practices do you employ in your everyday charters? Are any of your fish tagged for research purposes?

I practice 100 percent catch and release for mako sharks and have never killed one, even when offered money for the record books—this is an ethical stance for me. I have never killed a shark, and I never will. While I respect others' choices, I will always release sharks. I hope to expand tagging research on makos with my network of biologists, though funding is limited. Despite the lack of attention to mako shark research, I remain committed to this work.

How can you describe to our audience what an 800-pound mako cartwheeling 30 feet over your head does to your DNA?

There's nothing greater in saltwater fly fishing than watching an 800-pound mako shark jump 30 feet in the air, 25 yards from you. It is by far the most majestic, powerful, and magnificent display in saltwater fly fishing. Once a mako shark jumps out of the water and you see it for the first time, you'll never forget it. That image is imprinted in your memory forever.

Can you see either of your two boys following dad's footsteps, pursuing the shark game when they get older?

For my two boys, Max and Jackson, all I can do is show them the beauty and strength of the mako shark and teach them to respect them. Whether they want to follow in my footsteps or not, I don't have any control over that. However, if my passion for the mako shark inspires them to be passionate about other interests that they may have in life, then that's all I can ask.

If my boys can be the next generation of ambassadors for our oceans, our wetlands, or our fisheries, then my wife, Michelle, and I have done our jobs. Ultimately, if they become good human beings who are caring and passionate, then that's the ultimate compliment.

Describe your involvement with CastHope San Diego Chapter and how it's impacted the next generation of fly anglers?

Several years ago, Ryan Johnson, the Director of Cast Hope, invited me to serve as the Regional Director for San Diego. This role has opened my eyes to the needs of kids and the importance of taking kids outdoors. The great part is, Cast Hope is not just about fly fishing. We also teach kids about the science behind fishing, and it helps them understand and appreciate the fishing environment all that much more. It also makes them better anglers. I always said fly fishing is the key that opens the door to greater opportunity for these kids. We have many kids who love the science component of our program. If we can inspire one kid to be the next ambassador for the outdoors, whether it's through fishing or science, then the program is working.

We're shaping kids into being the conscience of our environment through an outdoor experience. Ideally, they will take their experience and incorporate it into the rest of their lives.

If you had only ONE species to fish for the rest of your life, what would it be and why?

I've been so fortunate to catch a variety of fish around the world. Still, I would say, if there's one fish and one experience that I would cherish for the rest of my life it would be ... big bluegill on a fly rod and popper at a pond on a summer evening with my kids and my wife somewhere far away from the commotion of our daily lives.

Conway was pointing in anticipation of a jump so Al could get the shot.

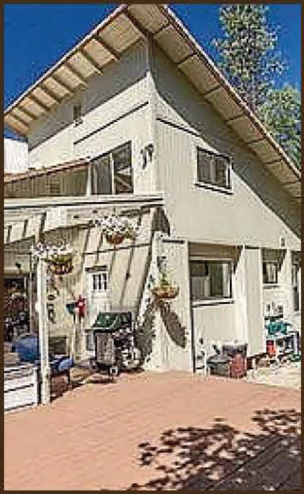

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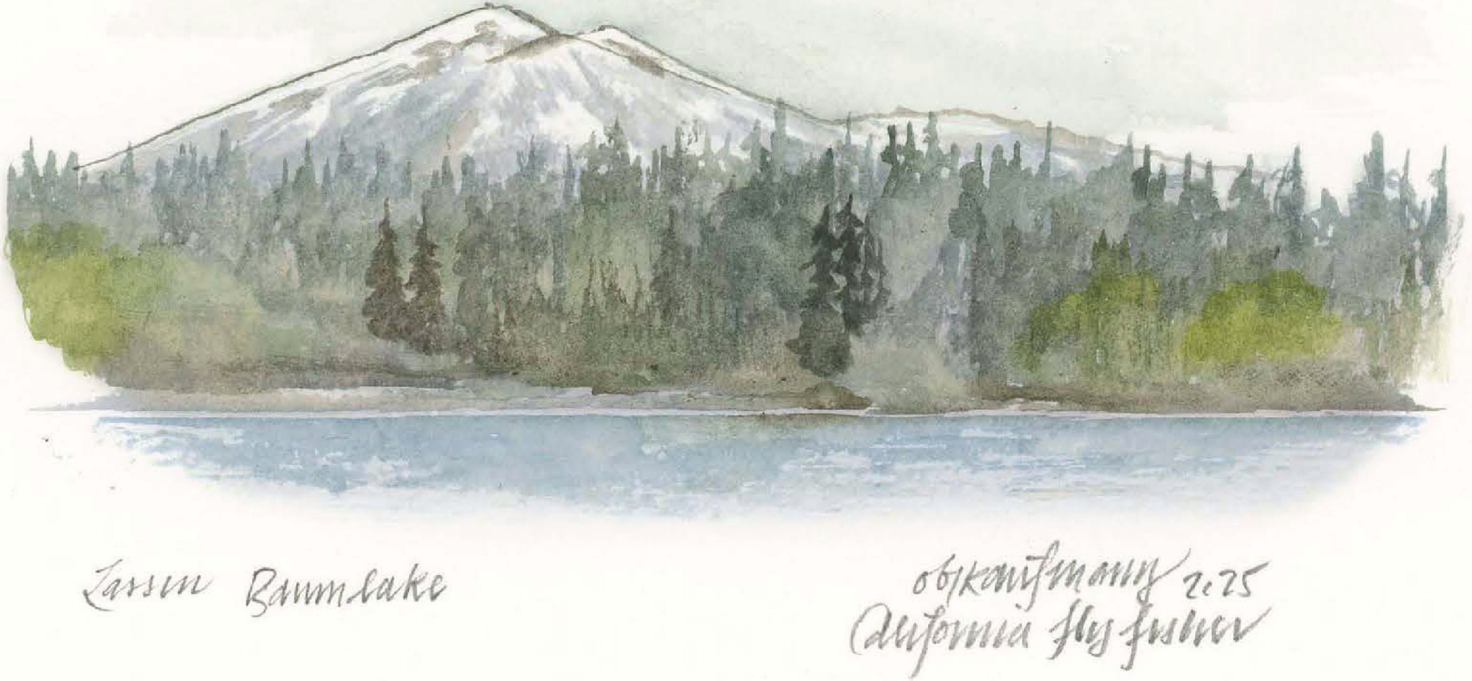
Photo: Val Atkinson

BAUM LAKE

Buster Wants to Fish

By Sean Stiny
Illustration by Obi Kaufman



Come late spring and early fall, I get a perennial itch to float an insect on top of some ruddy water and set a barbless hook into the lip of some poor bastard of a trout.

To balm my needless daily trifles and fiddle-faddles and instead unspool a red-letter day. More often, the trout is a somber hatchery rainbow, so happy to be in free water that a gooped up Elk Hair Caddis looks just dandy enough to fill their evening belly. And a trout's belly can never take no for an answer.

A haunt at the local fly shop in Dunsmuir, a rod case on the top of his Tacoma, a cold Mexican beer in the dark on his tailgate, my father is an unapologetic dry flier and barbless hook-er and catch-and-releaser til he's good and gone and his ashes swim with the browns in his adopted home waters in the high desert of Eastern Oregon (exact river name omitted because, well, you know).

Thus, I too am taken by the evening rise and the feel of cork in hand, the cool water sucking at my waders and the smooth rocks underboot. I set the de-barbed hook and utter a "got one" to myself, then consummate the trout v. biped tussle now at hand.

South of that Oregon river, one range over and across state lines, in the cool shade of Mt. Lassen sits Baum Lake, the perfect lakelet for a stumblebum fly fisherman like myself and an aged one like my father. Once you've been beaten up by the persnickety McCloud or the scabrous Hat Creek, Baum provides a respite for the angler who just wants to make a few placid casts to some open water in the warmth of the afternoon sun.

My rod tightens a few lines strictly from muscle memory, despite the rust that's built up in my shoulder and forearm all winter and early spring. Yet I read John Gierach tales all year, and chase them with Jim Harrison novels and Peter Heller mysteries. But there's no replacing the current that flows through your arm with a trout on the end of your line.

Baum quickly doesn't disappoint as I lay into a 15-incher not 20 minutes from launching my single-angler pontoon boat. My flippers paddle me in zigs and zags and the trout see it all from below with their eyes like eclipses, black over yellow, like moon over sun.

The narrow lake sits in a mixed conifer forest of firs and pines and oaks, where Lassen officially heralds the Cascades. Disregard the lake's inlet near the powerhouse that gets so much of the angler attention, and set a course for open water. There's a deep channel running through the middle (supposing six to eight feet is deep) flanked by tules on one side that holds the wiser rainbows and a few browns and even a few of mixed blood.

Now, I'm no surgeon with a fly rod, more of a deli butcher, but I manage to drop a cast or two right where I aim and float a Royal Wolff

A beautiful Baum Lake rainbow. Photo by Sean Stiny

directly over the heads of the anxious-to-eat 'bows. A pulse of current rives through my arm, a strike, not dissimilar to the hydroelectricity for which this lake was built. The trout shakes and vibrates and breaches, but my fly never wavers in his lower jaw. This won't end well for him.

Trout were put here to enrapture our imagination and sustain the taloned and the clawed. Baum Lake was put on this spot to capture hydroelectric power from Hat Creek. Though, is not every lake and stream now rearranged by human hands in countless ways? Even the high alpine ones that took us longer to conquer?

Made by the Pacific Gas & Electric Company, Baum was flooded up and named after their powerhouse engineer many years before the company went scorched earth on untold swaths of California land. The Pacific Crest Trail meanders along the water for a stretch as well, but only one lone trekker was making her voyage. Everything across this landscape has been deflowered in some way. Countless ponderosas around the lake have succumbed to a dot of pink spray paint. They must come down later, when the weather allows, for some bureaucratic reason.

Though, at risk of angler blasphemy, it's fair to say that when your eyes lift up from your bedraggled Parachute Adams for the slightest moment, something about the lake surpasses the trout fishing. Baum whirs to life, a bacchanal of coyote, mule deer, buffleheaded ducks, laughing coots, flocks of great blue herons and their spindly legs, aquatic garter snakes (one tried to catch its breath in my boat), beaver lodges, oak groves, bear scat, chestnut acorns beneath oaks peppered with a thousand holes drilled by acorn woodpeckers for their cache. Two largely pescatarian bald eagles circled and circled for their breakfast to no avail. A corporation made this lake, but the landscape paid it no mind.

Out there too are lions and black bears. Black bears abound, their numbers ever increasing. Cause for immense optimism. But out there now is something much more. Something so unimaginable just a scant few years ago. Something for which I want to hold my breath all night and listen for their canine call. A pack of gray wolves. Here and now in our own California.

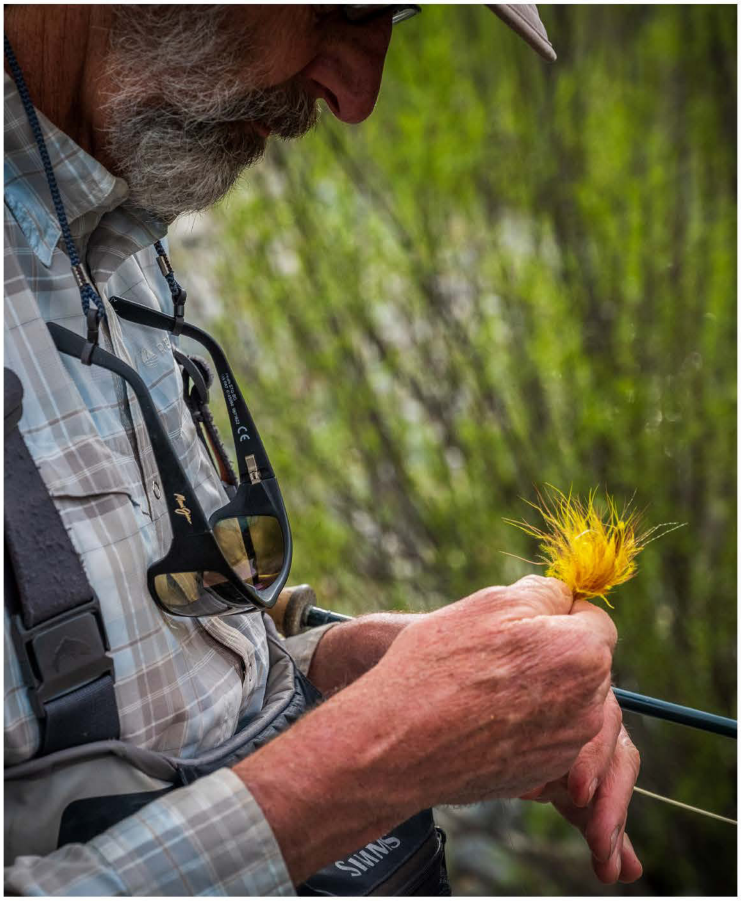
The predators of the apex are thriving. And I am struck by the thought that a few grizzlies in Montana and Idaho could very well drift into Eastern Oregon in a couple decades and maybe, just maybe, quietly slip down into the northernmost part of California and restore Ursus arctos californicus to their forgotten homeland.

But those are considerations for another time, perhaps 50 years from now. For the rest of the afternoon, I lay down my ruminations and let the trout dictate my thoughts. For it's the Elk Hair Caddis on the end of my line and the speckled trout eyeing it from below that unburdens the quiet of my mind.

Twilight Rite

A Tale of Two Spiders

By Greg DeYoung


The author and a Platte River Spider. Photo Gary Swenor

I walk up the dirt road gingerly picking my path around ruts and deadfall. I'm thinking about the flows, the light, the fish. Suddenly an explosion of black feathers just feet away—turkey vultures blast upward. I look down and see fresh kill, my eyes drawn into the dark socket that once enclosed the deer's eye. What killed it? And when might it return for its cache? I consider returning to my truck, but nervous energy propels me forward. What are the chances that a mountain lion is going to mess with me when its cupboards are full?

I refocus on my path, trying to ignore my twitching eyelid; when was the last time that twitch betrayed me—biology class finals, decades ago? I concentrate on my mission to test two flies at dusk on a remote stretch of river. This part of the river isn't known for good fishing, but my son and I have found large rainbow and brown trout here. This is our "secret spot," and we have never seen anglers here or anyone else.

Recently, two spiders captured my imagination and my time at the vise. I now carry them to their christening. One, the Mallard Spider, preceded my generation, and the other, the Platte River Spider, followed it.

Looking back through some older fly-tying books, I had stumbled upon and been intrigued by the scene described by Jack Dennis, in which his grandfather would troll the Mallard Spider on Lewis Lake in Yellowstone National Park. The fly was born when pioneering Jackson Hole fly shop owner and guide, Bob Carmichael, collaborated with the California longshoreman and steelhead fly tyer, Roy Donnelly, after World War II to create the fly. I could never forget this statement by Jack Dennis regarding the Mallard Spider, "Hidden back in the antique fly boxes of some of the great old-time fly fishermen, you will occasionally find a long-forgotten pattern whose day may have come again." I wanted to find out if the Mallard Spider's time may have come again, at least here and now in the secret spot.

THE PLATTE RIVER SPIDER

The modern fly I carry, the Platte River Spider, leapt from a page of Charlie Craven's book Tying Streamers. Like the Mallard Spider, the Platte River Spider is wrapped with marabou and mallard, but with a feathered wing tied atop. I was drawn to the elegance of the Platte River Spider, which Craven asserts "may just be the prettiest modern trout fly out there." The pattern was designed by the steelhead fisher and former guide and drift boat builder, Chris Schrantz.

I tie on the Platte River Spider first. There are brown trout in this reach, and I want to test if the orange and yellow hues of this spider will trigger one of the big fish we have found here. I pitch the line into the current and let it swing into the seam 50 feet down; I pull in and cast again. On the third swing, I feel an abrupt jerk, then slack. It's a break-off. A break-off of the only Platte River Spider that I have.

THE MALLARD SPIDER

Looking up and around, I now see and feel the deepening dusk. As I've aged, I have increasingly told myself that venturesome risk to a life well lived is acceptable. I relate to Norman of A River Runs Through It when he says, "I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn't."

Yet in the half light of the canyon, my courage begins to fade in equal measure with the diminishing daylight. It's a long walk past the deer carcass back to the truck, and there is no cell signal for a call out. For a moment, thinking of the darkening trail, I consider leaving.

But I have come here specifically to fish streamers at dusk. I tie on the Mallard Spider, a pattern over half a century older than the Platte River Spider.

Six or seven casts into the same seam, I feel a strong tug and solid connection.

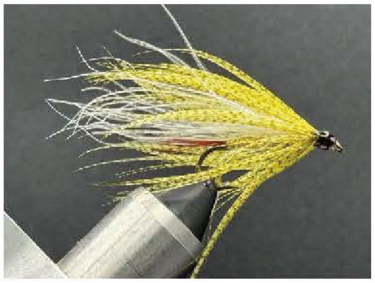
It's a powerful fish that takes several minutes to land. As I bring it in, my attention is diverted by a flash of more color at the mouth than

I expected to see—the Mallard Spider I am fishing is mostly muted tan and yellow. Then I see bright yellow on the other side of the fish's mouth from the Mallard Spider—the Platte River Spider! This is the fish that broke off the Platte River Spider earlier. It now has the two spiders, one on each side of its mouth.

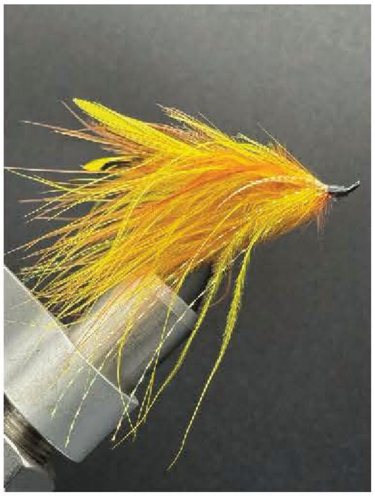
The novelty of the sight makes me smile. But then there is something else, something more than the serendipity of two flies in one fish. I feel the tug of history, alongside the lure of the contemporary, in seeing the post-war spider joined with the post-millennium spider. It's this wild fish's response to these patterns, one by the longshoreman and the other by the drift boat builder. It's a taste of heritage in the sport, something that's always been ineffable for me.

I recover the Platte River Spider, remove the Mallard Spider, and unconsciously start crossing the cobbles toward the trail. I've always thought of fishing with the flies I've tied as tinkering. Something in a magazine or on YouTube might catch my eye and move me to the tying vise. The pattern could be created by anyone from anywhere. But today became more than just tinkering. My mind drifts back to the longshoreman and the boat builder, two people who didn't know each other, who couldn't have known each other across the gulf of time. Still, their ingenuity has come together here, in one place, one moment, with one fish. I feel privileged to be part of it.

Now I hear a soft, slow, serene call. A mourning dove? An owl? I look up. It must be an evening owl, not a daytime dove, that accompanies me on this gravel bar. I realize that I'm no longer nervous in the fading light. Or perhaps the apprehension has changed to a charged awareness, just part of the fullness of being in nature. I turn back to the river, and, in the quarter-light of the canyon, reinitiate the cast, the ageless twilight rite. ◆



Mallard Spider. Photo by Greg DeYoung



Platte River Spider. Photo by Greg DeYoung

Tying Notes

The spiders in this story, though separated by decades, share this foundation: both were designed by West Coast steelhead fishers and fly designers, bringing their skills and insights to the Intermountain West. Both flies use mallard and marabou, and both use red or orange fibers for the tail.

The Mallard Spider

Hook: Mustad 9671, sizes 2-10
Thread: Black, tyer's choice
Tail: Red hackle fibers
Body: Yellow floss
Ribbing: Gold embossed tinsel
Underwing: White or light-yellow marabou
Hackle: Mallard breast feather
Tying tips: The tail is tied such that it extends one-half to one-third of the shank length past the bend. The body is simply yellow floss with tinsel ribbing. The marabou is tied in on top, just in front of the body, and the mallard is wound around the shank in front of and over the marabou.

Step-by-step tying instructions for the Mallard Spider are in Jack Dennis's book, ***Western Trout Fly Tying Manual, Volume II*** (1980).

The Platte River Spider

Hook: Tiemco 200R size 4
Thread: Black 70-denier UTC
Tail/Underwing: Red or orange Amherst pheasant tail fibers (or similar)
Body: Yellow and brown marabou
Hackle: Mallard flank feather dyed wood duck gold
Flash: Root beer Krystal Flash
Wing: Yellow and furnace Chinese rooster neck hackle
Hackle: Mallard breast feather
Tying tips: Amherst pheasant tail fibers are specified, but I have found that strung guinea feathers are a feasible substitute. The yellow and brown marabou should be selected to have similar fiber length, about two shank lengths long, as these feathers are paired and wrapped. The mallard feather should have fibers at least as long as the hook shank; the feather is wrapped over the marabou. The yellow and furnace hackles should be the same length as they are arranged to form the wing—two furnace feathers bracket two yellow hackles.

Detailed tying instructions for the Platte River Spider are within Charlie Craven's book, *Tying Streamers* (2020).

To imitate rainbow, versus brown, trout minnows, the tyer can substitute olive marabou and neck hackle for the yellow marabou and hackle specified above.

Eagle Lake

AN OVERLOOKED GEM IN THE HIGH DESERT

By Joe Garza

The author's son working a pod of cruising rainbows. Photo by Joe Garza

Eagle Lake will always remind me of my good friend, Jay Fair (rest his kind soul)—a man who taught as much about life as he did about fly fishing.

My first trip there was far from smooth: freezing nights, leaky waders, and a shaky start. But thanks to Jay's advice, and the kindness of strangers who soon became friends, the lake gave me more than fish. It gave me lessons I'll carry forever.

That trip marked my baptism into the rewarding world of stillwater fly fishing. After hearing Jay speak at a local club, I became convinced that late October was the ideal time to go. I brought along my oldest son, who was 11 at the time, and we headed to Spaulding, where I thought I had reserved a small cabin for our four-night stay. We arrived around 2 p.m., eager to unload and prepare for the next day's adventure—only to be directed to the "Ritz," a shack with two twin beds, one solid wall, three screened walls, a roof, and a fire pit and picnic table out front. That was it.

Fortunately, a fellow club member had suggested I pack a small portable heater. Good advice because we definitely needed it. That first night, the temperature dropped to 29°F, with winds gusting to 20 mph until nearly 3:30 a.m. My son and I shoved the two beds together in front of the heater, zipped our sleeping bags together, layered on every piece of clothing we had, and huddled in the least windy corner. Sunrise couldn't come soon enough.

Running on little sleep, we rose at 5 a.m., ate a quick breakfast, and were on the water by 6:15. Waders on, fins strapped, float tubes launched, rods ready—we started fishing along the tule edges just after 7 a.m. An hour later, my son said his legs felt cold. I chalked it up to the rough night and told him the sun would warm him soon. But another hour passed with no bites, and when I noticed him shivering, I knew something was wrong. Back on shore, we discovered his waders had sprung a leak just below the waistline.

Thankfully, we had dry clothes in the truck. While he changed, I packed up and took him back to the campground for a hot shower, worried less about fishing and more about facing another freezing night in that shack.

At the camp office, I explained our situation and mentioned that we might have to cut the trip short. The manager asked me to wait, made a quick phone call, and returned with good news: The owner had an RV on-site with a heater we could use. We gratefully accepted.

By the time we moved in and unpacked, it was past 1 p.m., so we took a much-needed nap. Word of our mishap spread quickly, and by 3 p.m. a club member knocked on our RV door with a backup pair of waders that fit my son perfectly. That act of kindness meant a lot. His original waders had dried enough to patch, so we worked on that too and planned to double-layer them the next day, just in case. After dinner, my son had one more request: ice cream.

As luck would have it, we ran into Jay and his son Glenn at the campground store. Jay had become a close family friend after helping my son with fly tying. When he asked how our day had gone, we told him the story. He smiled knowingly and said, "Tomorrow will be better." Then he asked, "Joe, while you two were fishing today, did you ever feel like you were dragging your fly over a blade of grass or brushing up against the tules?" My son and I answered in unison: "Yes." Jay nodded. "Next time you feel that, do me a favor—set the hook." We thanked him and headed back to the RV, warmed by more than just the heater that night.

The next morning, we were ready. On my second cast, I felt that same subtle tug, like I'd snagged a blade of grass. I set the hook, just as Jay had advised, and landed a beautiful 21-inch Eagle Lake Rainbow Trout. On his fourth cast, my son hooked and landed a 20-incher. By 11 a.m., we had caught and released 14 fish between us.

That evening, we saw Jay and Glenn again. Jay grinned and asked, "Well, how was your second day?" He was delighted to hear his advice had made all the difference. He explained that as trout cruise, they quickly suck in food but spit it right back out if it doesn't seem edible. Eagle Lake, he told us, isn't just a fishing destination—it's a place to learn.

That lesson rang true for both my son and me. The kindness we received from Jay, Glenn, the camp staff, and fellow anglers made the trip unforgettable. It wasn't just about the fish we caught—it became a lifelong memory.

EAGLE LAKE: CALIFORNIA'S STILLWATER TREASURE

Nestled in the northeastern Sierra Nevada at 5,100 feet, Eagle Lake is California's second-largest natural freshwater lake. Often overlooked, it remains one of the state's most underrated stillwater fly-fishing destinations. Just 16 miles north of Susanville, and within a scenic two-hour drive from Reno or two and a half from Redding, Eagle Lake offers rugged beauty amidst a rich aquatic ecosystem that draws anglers from all over.

What makes Eagle Lake truly special, though, isn't just the scenery—it's the fish. The lake is home to the famous Eagle Lake rainbow trout, a California Heritage Trout renowned for its resilience. They grow quickly thanks to the abundant supply of food and an ecosystem that provides ideal habitat. The best time for anglers to experience Eagle Lake begins in the fall and extends into winter. The lake truly offers one of the most naturally rugged yet serene settings in the state.

THE LAKE AND ITS BASINS

Eagle Lake is an endorheic system, meaning it has no natural outlet so its water levels fluctuate dramatically with seasonal snow and rain. It is divided into three distinct basins, each with its own unique characteristics:

- ***North Basin*** — Shallow (about 15 feet), bordering high desert terrain with sagebrush, grassy meadows, and rocky shoreline.
- ***Central Basin*** — About 20 feet deep, a transition zone where pines meet sagebrush and grasslands.
- ***South Basin*** — The deepest section (nearly 90 feet), ringed by cedar and pine that taper into meadows and rock.

Little Troxel Point and Buck's Point connect North and Central basins while the Central and South basins are linked by a shallow, rocky channel between Pelican Point and Youth Camp where boats are frequently damaged on submerged rock piles, requiring rescue.

EAGLE LAKE RAINBOW TROUT

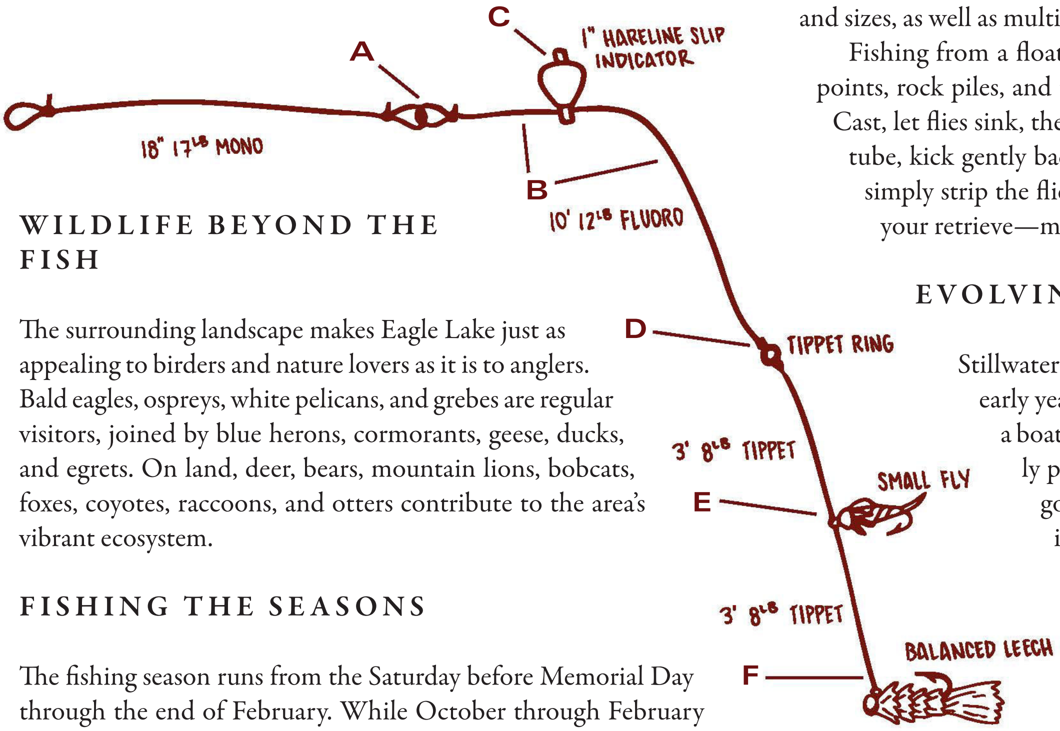
Eagle Lake home to *Oncorhynchus mykiss aquilarum*, a subspecies of rainbow trout found nowhere else. These trout can be identified by white-tipped fins, straight (rather than forked) tails, and a faint pink lateral line with irregular spotting that fades toward the belly. Unlike other rainbows, the males do not develop a pronounced "kipe" (hooked jaw).

Due to water fluctuations and the loss of natural spawning habitat, these trout are listed as a California "species of special concern." While Pine Creek—on the west side of the Central Basin—was historically the only spawning tributary, years of drought and low water levels have made it unreliable. In response, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, along with conservation groups, established a rearing program to ensure the survival of the species. Adults are trapped near Pine Creek, their eggs and milt collected, and the fertilized eggs raised in hatcheries— Crystal Lake, Mt. Shasta, and Darrah Springs. After 18 months, the young trout are released back into Eagle Lake and beyond. Remarkably, they thrive in the lake's high-alkaline waters (pH ~9) and grow faster than most other rainbow trout. These hardy fish have been successfully transplanted to other areas in California, Canada, and New Zealand.

Author Joe Garza with a healthy Eagle Lake rainbow. Photo by Mark Antaramian

A RICH FOOD WEB

The lake's habitat supports a wide variety of aquatic species, contributing to its rich ecosystem and providing an abundance of food for the trout. The North and Central basins are full of tules and submerged weed beds, while the South basin has weed beds and porous volcanic rock. According to a DFW study, Eagle Lake trout diets consist of leeches (30 percent), snails and scuds (26 percent), and tui chub (12 percent). The rest of their diet (32 percent) was supplemented seasonally by chironomids, caddis, *Callibaetis*, damselflies, *Hexagenia limbata*, and daphnia. This bounty explains the trout's rapid growth and the lake's reputation for producing hefty, healthy fish.



WILDLIFE BEYOND THE FISH

The surrounding landscape makes Eagle Lake just as appealing to birders and nature lovers as it is to anglers. Bald eagles, ospreys, white pelicans, and grebes are regular visitors, joined by blue herons, cormorants, geese, ducks, and egrets. On land, deer, bears, mountain lions, bobcats, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, and otters contribute to the area's vibrant ecosystem.

FISHING THE SEASONS

The fishing season runs from the Saturday before Memorial Day through the end of February. While October through February are the most productive months, anglers must be prepared for cold, sometimes extreme, conditions: icy roads, frozen boat ramps, and frigid winds. Layering clothing, packing hand and feet warmers, and a warm hat are essential. While fly fishing can be productive during the early summer, water temperatures rise quickly and trout retreat to deeper, cooler zones.

While there are many good shore access points around the lake, boat access can be more challenging. The Eagle Lake Marina at the south end is the most reliable launch, though water levels dictate whether Spaulding Tract's facility is accessible.

TECHNIQUES AND TACTICS

When I first fished Eagle Lake, stillwater fly fishing was just starting to gain in popularity, and the go-to methods involved either:

Intermediate or Type III sinking lines with a 9-foot 3X fluorocarbon tapered leader, often rigged with a #10 wiggle tail (leech) or #8 trolling fly tui chub imitation; or a #12 scud pattern with 20 inches of 3X fluorocarbon tippet and another smaller #14 scud pattern in a different color. Retrieval was slow hand-twists, with subtle strikes answered by a slight strip set.

Floating lines with 12-foot leaders, these were built using a 9-foot 3X fluorocarbon tapered leader and adding three feet of 3X tippet. Similar fly patterns and retrieve methods as with the intermediate lines were used. A dry fly with floatant applied was added to the end of our 12-foot leader if trout were rising to the surface. Strikes on dries required a brief pause before setting the hook.

A note on scuds: Their colors shift to match their surroundings—olive near tules and weed beds, tan or gray near rocks, brown or rust in mud. Dead scuds turn orange, and pregnant females carry an orange egg sac. Scud spawn year-round, so it is a good idea to have multiple colors and sizes, as well as multiple colors with egg sacks.

Fishing from a float tube or wading, I've found fishing around points, rock piles, and tules around 9–15 feet to be the sweet spot. Cast, let flies sink, then begin a slow, hand-twist retrieve. In a float tube, kick gently backward when starting your retrieve; wading, simply strip the flies back to you. Always pause near the end of your retrieve—many strikes come then.

EVOLVING METHODS

Stillwater tactics at Eagle Lake have evolved since my early years. In recent years, indicator nymphing from a boat, float tube, or wading has become increasingly popular and productive. Several years ago, my good friend and fellow guide Mark Antaramian introduced me to Phil Rowley and Brian Chan's method of fly fishing stillwater—using a long leader with a midge and balanced leech suspended under an indicator. Electronics help pinpoint where the fish are in the water column, and how and what they're feeding on, helping anglers set

Eagle Lake is California's second-largest natural freshwater lake. Photo by Joe Garza

the depth of their indicators—about 2.5 feet off the bottom. Cast 15-20 feet out, letting your flies sink keeping tight with your indicator. Mend accordingly. Unlike tailwaters, in stillwater it is ok to move the indicator, giving the fly a swimming action. Strikes can be very subtle; any movement in the indicator warrants a hook set.

In recent years, Spey and switch rods have also become a popular choice among waders and shore anglers. This versatile option allows you to reach further distances from shore while wading. Lightweight, 3/4-weight 11–12.5 foot rods paired with floating heads for dry flies and indicators; a 10-foot intermediate or sink tip for streamers. The same leader builds apply for either technique.

For our leader we start with 18 inches of 17-pound monofilament, with a perfection loop at both ends. **(A)** Secure one end of the looped monofilament to the loop end of your floating fly line, this will be your butt section. **(B)** Next cut a 10-foot piece of 12-pound fluorocarbon and tie a perfection loop at one end. Attach that loop to the open loop of your butt section. **(C)** Slide on a large 1-inch hareline slip indicator. **(D)** Clinch knot on a small tippet ring at the end of your 12-pound fluorocarbon. **(E)** On your tippet ring, tie on three feet of 8-pound tippet, then clinch knot to the eye of your first fly. Your first fly will be the smallest of your two flies. Next clinch knot on another three feet of 8-pound tippet to the eye of your first fly. **(F)** At the bottom of that tippet use a loop knot to tie on a balanced leech.

A LAKE WORTH PROTECTING

Eagle Lake stands as a testament to the resilience of nature, offering a serene experience for those looking to connect with wildlife, enjoy fly fishing, or just appreciate the beauty of Northern California. Protecting this fishery through ongoing conservation ensures future generations will experience the same lessons and memories this lake continues to provide. ◆

Local Guides

J.A.G. Fly Fishing – Joe Garza
JAGFlyFishing.com
jagflyfishing@gmail.com
530) 570–0978

Mark Antaramian Guide Services
markantaramian@gmail.com
(916) 705–1207

Fly Recommendations

Scud: Year-round
Nymph size: #12 - #14
Colors: olive, brown, gray, tan, orange
Patterns: Ultra Scud, Expecting Scud

Caddis: Year-round
Nymph size: Springtime #12 - #14 Fall #14 - #16
Patterns: Fox Pupa, Holy Grail Caddis Pupa.
Dry fly size: Springtime #12 - #14 Fall #14 - #16
Patterns: E.C. Caddis, Hogan's Simple Cripple Caddis.
Colors: olive, brown, tan, cinnamon, black

Chironomid: Year-round
Nymph size: Springtime #12 - #14 Fall #16 - #18
Colors: black and red, black and silver, olive, red and black, red and silver, grey
Patterns: Rowley's Black Sally, Rowley's Chromie

Callibaetis: Spring through fall
Nymph size: Springtime #12 - #14 Fall #16 - #18
Patterns: Mercer's Poxyback Callibaetis, Galloup's Callibaetis Nymph
Dry fly size: Springtime #12 - #14 Fall #14 - #18
Patterns: Parachute Adams, Sparkle Dun
Colors: gray, tan, olive, brown

General Attractors: Tui Chub, Leech, Damselflies, and Hexagenia
Balanced Leech: year-round
Size: #8 - #12
Patterns: Rowley's Balanced Leech, Bruised Leech
Wiggle Tail: year-round.
Size: #10 - #12
Patterns: Jay Fair Wiggle Tail, Jay Fair Trolling Fly (Tui Chub)
Colors: rust, burnt orange, olive, black, brown, natural hares ear

Also, have some Daphnia patterns on hand in orange, green, and pink.

THE FORAGING ANGLER

The Delta

By Lance Gray

CRAWDADS ON THE RIVER SACRAMENTO, CA

If you want to talk about a joint that would be my perfect eatery, this place is it. It's on the river—not beside it, not overlooking it; it's literally on the river. It's easily accessible, has a large parking lot, is in a great location, has excellent staff, and, above all, the food is fantastic.

Kirsten and I dined at Crawdad's with our friend and local Delta guide Toby Uppinghouse. I asked Toby for his advice on the best places to eat. Without hesitation, he said, "Crawdads!" Kirsten and I planned to meet him on our way to Morro Bay.

Kirsten and I arrived first and checked out the place. It is huge and features an interior sitting area adjacent to a 25-yard bar stocked with every liquor imaginable. There is also an outdoor eating area on the river rail of the floating restaurant. On the upstream side of the restaurant is a huge dance floor and stage for bands.

Kirsten and I sat at a table on the rail and ordered drinks, a Bloody Mary for me and iced tea for Kirsten. Toby arrived and was greeted instantly by our waiter, who obviously knew him well, taking his order for a vodka and soda with lime. I asked Toby what was good, and he simply gestured to the menu, indicating everything.

I ordered the ceviche, and Kirsten chose the fish and chips. Toby only ordered a basket of fries, saying he'd had a big breakfast earlier and wasn't hungry. When our food arrived, Toby was right—everything was delicious. My ceviche had shrimp and sea bass. It was ice-cold, with freshly chopped veggies and perfectly seasoned. It came with a large plate of fresh, hot tortilla chips that were lightly salted. I finished the huge bowl and all the chips. It was great. Kirsten said her fish and chips were excellent. She likes fish that is lightly battered, not heavy. She told me they were perfectly battered, cooked, and seasoned. Two thumbs up from her. The fries alone are excellent. They're "batter-fried" fries—crisp and light. I sneaked some from Kirsten's plate.

On our way out, stuffed to our gills, Toby introduced us to Trevor Shults, the owner. He was lovely and enjoyed hearing that we had a great time.

Crawdads on the River - $$$
1375 Garden Hwy
Sacramento, CA 95833
916-929-2268

Open Monday – Sunday, 11 a.m. – 9 p.m.

Owner Trevor Shults

WIMPY'S MARINA WALNUT GROVE

This location reminds me of Scotty's on the Sacramento River in Chico. It's situated directly on New Hope Landing, at the confluence of the Mokelumne River and Snodgrass Slough.

Wimpy's has an old bar with a sitting area inside. On the north side, there's a large open area with an outdoor stage for bands. Kirsten's and my favorite place to sit at Wimpy's is the outdoor area beside the river.

This place doesn't have a fancy menu. They offer a one-page menu for breakfast, covering the usual favorites, and another for lunch/dinner, which includes everything from appetizers to the main course, featuring sandwiches and burgers.

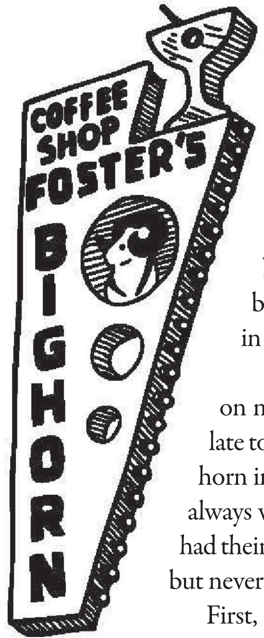
I've never had breakfast at Wimpy's, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's just as good as their lunch and dinner. It's a toss-up as to what I usually order. The last couple of times I've gone, I've chosen something other than the burger, ordering the Riverbird sandwich instead. The Riverbird features a hearty portion of hot turkey breast on a sesame hamburger bun, topped with thick-cut bacon, Swiss cheese, and grilled thin-sliced red onions, all served with a slice of ice-cold tomato. Add the mayonnaise, mustard, and a generous helping of tator-tots, and I'm in heaven. I usually order a River Rat cocktail to wash it down. I can't tell you what's in their River Rat concoction, but it's good!

Wimpy's Marina - $$
14001 West Walnut Grove Road
Walnut Grove, CA 95690
209-794-2544

Open Monday 12 p.m. – 9 p.m.
Friday – Sunday 7 a.m. – 9 p.m.

Owner Gerry Goodie, Jr.

FOSTER'S BIGHORN RIO VISTA



I pulled up to Foster's one afternoon right when the staff was getting ready for the evening. They invited me in a few minutes before opening and made me the best Russian Vodka Mule I have had in years.

I was traveling through Rio Vista on my way to Stockton and stopped in late to get a bite. I haven't been to the Bighorn in probably five to seven years, and I always wanted to have dinner there. I have had their breakfast and lunch multiple times, but never their dinner.

First, let me tell you that I haven't had a bad meal at Foster's. I've even had more than I should drink there in the past, but that's a story for another time. The vibe of this joint is simply overwhelming with history. Not just the animal mounts, but the pictures hanging on the wall take me back. There is one that is of one of my mentor Denton Hill. Chris Wakeman and his staff feel just like I do, and the place is a destination you should add to your list.

Once I finished my mule, I ordered the special, chicken marsala, for dinner. I'm always looking for ideas for marsala and like to make pheasant marsala in the fall while I'm hunting.

The Bighorn's marsala was to die for. Tender chicken with a light breading, fried and then baked with olive oil, capers, and fresh cilantro. The chicken was crisp on the outside and melted in your mouth. It was served with homemade linguine in the same sauce as the chicken, along with fresh vegetables on the side.

I planned to return to Foster's the next day for breakfast, but they were closed, so I headed home. I made a detour and had breakfast at Putah Creek Café instead!

Foster's Bighorn - $$$
143 Main Street
Rio Vista, CA 94571
707-374-2511

Open Monday – Thursday 10 a.m. – 11 p.m.
Friday 10 a.m. to midnight
Saturday – Sunday 10 a.m.. to 1 a.m.

Owner Chris Wakeman

THE RUSTY PORTHOLE BETHEL ISLAND

RUSTY
PORTHOLE

The first time I walked into this joint, maybe 10 years ago, there were four sheriff's deputies having lunch. They were on boat patrol duty. With that ringing endorsement, I stayed for lunch.

I sat outside on the deck and noticed that many of the patrons were local folks. It had a good vibe, and I was browsing both the food and drink menus. I asked my waitress what she recommended, and she immediately replied, "If you like burgers, ours are the best!" I ordered a Long Island iced tea and a double cheeseburger. The double cheeseburger was huge, cooked to medium-rare, with all the fresh, cold veggies. The colder the veggies, the fresher the burger. I hate hot veggies! The drink was great, and the burger was even better—pushing a nine on my burger scale.

I really like this place and have eaten here for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I like that they have a big whiteboard with all their specials listed. Although it's an old building sitting on the harbor, they're dishing up some great food.

The last few times Kirsten and I went there, we just stuck to cocktails and appetizers. We had a shrimp cocktail, crab cakes, and the rib-eye Oscar. Holy moly. The shrimp were jumbo-sized, and the homemade cocktail sauce was spot on, almost like a Marie Rose sauce. The crab cakes were crispy and hot, served with ice-cold homemade tartar sauce, and the rib-eye Oscar was fantastic, with crab and Béarnaise sauce drizzled over asparagus on the side. This joint is smokin'!

The Rusty Porthole - $$
3893 Willow Road
Bethel Island, CA 94511
925-684-3607

Open Monday – Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.
Friday, 11:30 a.m. to midnight
Saturday – Sunday, 10:30 a.m. to midnight

Owners Kimi and Rob Brunham

BOB'S AT THE MARINA STOCKTON

Alright, folks, I've heard you. At least half a dozen folks have told me I needed to go to Bob's. I want to tell y'all I have gone repeatedly. I've been there half a dozen times now— and I need to go more.

The first time I went, I ordered the Bob's Giant Burger. Yes, it was terrific. A half-pound patty with Swiss cheese, cooked to perfection, served on a giant bun with all the ice-cold veggies piled on top. It comes with mustard and a homemade dressing. I asked one of the ladies who works there what the recipe for the "dressing" is. She just smiled and walked away. The fries are delicious, especially the batter-fried variety. I like them!

On other visits, I've expanded my palette beyond just burgers. One time, I ordered fish tacos featuring beer-battered cod on a corn tortilla, topped with Monterey Jack cheese, lettuce, and homemade salsa. They're great—a little spicy but perfect with the hot, fried cod. I've also tried their tuna sandwich. It's a winner. It's not your typical tuna sandwich your mom used to make. This one is assembled on sourdough bread, filled with a generous portion of white albacore tuna salad, lettuce, tomato, and thinly sliced red onions—served with fries or a dinner salad for a healthier option. No matter what side you choose, the tuna is the star.

Bob's at the Marina - $$
6639 Embarcadero Drive
Stockton, CA 95219
209-957-3279

Open Monday - Thursday, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Friday - Sunday, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Owners Josh and Nichole Abdon

ORWOOD RESORT BAR & GRILL BRENTWOOD

Orwood Resort Bar & Grill has been owned and operated by the Caprio family for more than 50 years. It is an institution in Brentwood, CA.

John Sherman, a friend, writer, photographer, and fly-fishing representative for Sage Fly Rods and other companies, recommended this place to me. I asked John for a recommendation for a spot in the Delta, and he simply replied with, "Orwood is solid." I also asked some friends who launch their boats from the resort, and I received all positive reviews—big hearts and thumbs-up emojis. I told Kirsten that I had to visit the place. Kirsten hasn't had the time to check it out yet, but I have—three times so far.

On multiple trips down to the East Bay, I gave myself a few extra hours to check this place out, and I keep going back. As soon as I walked up to Orwood, I knew it was special. You can literally sit on a barstool and watch folks take their boats in and out. It's some great people watching.

I have ordered a few items so far, mainly for breakfast. First, you need to try their Bloody Marys. They score a solid eight. A little hint of Worcestershire and horseradish. Very good. I've had the Hangover Burger, but my favorite is the "Yolk-ie" Taco. This is no ordinary taco. Made with a big, deep-fried tortilla, ground beef, beans, scrambled eggs, Monterey Jack cheese, tomatoes, green onions, with sour cream and homemade salsa on the side. I can't wait to take Kirsten there!

Orwood Resort Bar & Grill - $$$
4451 Orwood Road
Brentwood, CA 94513
925-634-2550

Open Monday – Wednesday, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Thursday – Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Saturday, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Owned by the Caprio family (for 50 years!)

GUIDE THOUGHTS

Don't Forget Your Roots

By Capt. Hogan Brown

It has been a weird summer season for me so far. I had a list of places I wanted to fish and things I wanted to do to escape the summer doldrums, but truck and boat issues derailed some of those plans. Until this last month, I would have told you that I keep my fishing pretty simple, but I've realized that's far from the truth.

Early in the season, I hit a log in my jet boat on the river—totally my fault and not something I'm proud of—which caused a bunch of issues with my motor that took a few weeks to work out. Just as those problems were finally resolved, the check engine light came on in my new truck. That led to nearly a month of warranty repairs, leaving me without a truck.

For a few weeks this summer, I was without a motorboat, which forced me to pivot my guide trips to floats down the Lower Yuba River for trout. I hadn't guided the Yuba in nearly two years, let alone gone trout fishing. I realized how much I missed my home river and watching trout come up to eat a dry fly. There's something refreshing about not having all the technology of a fully outfitted center-console bass boat. Not much can break down or cause confusion in a rowboat.

While front-facing sonar, down scan, spot-lock trolling motors, and a 225hp engine make guiding fun, they also increase dependence on equipment that can (and does) break. Guiding from a motorboat with all that gear creates a constant sense of anxiety that it could fail at any moment.

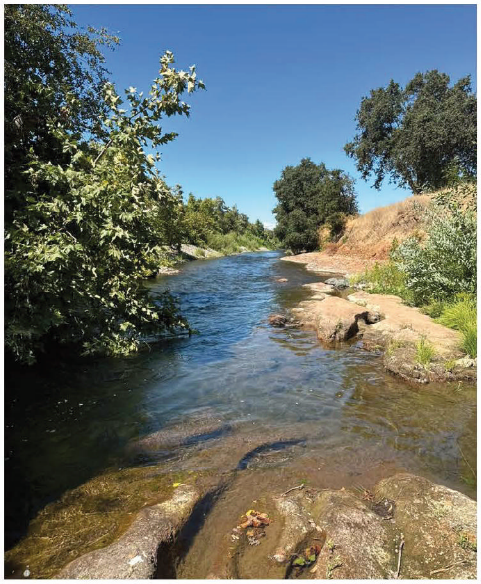
Later that month, my boat was back in service, and for a few weeks, everything ran smoothly. But on the way back from a lacrosse tournament in Bend, Oregon, the dreaded "check engine" light came on. It turned out to be a serious issue. Thankfully, it was covered under warranty, but it still took about a month of back-and-forth trips to the shop.

In the meantime, I was left driving my dad's old F-150 ranch truck with manual roll-down windows, a four-speed stick shift, a horn that randomly went off, and just enough reliability to cover 15–20 miles of flat ground without breaking down. On occasion, I even had to borrow my 17-year-old's car. Needless to say, neither of those vehicles was towing a boat, which meant rescheduling or canceling guide trips.

Around this same time, I went on a work trip to Truckee. Luckily, my coworker picked me up, and we fished the area for a few days. I hadn't fished around Truckee since I left Nevada County in 2001—over 20 years ago. On our second day, we hit the main stem of the Truckee River. Even midweek, it was insanely crowded. I hadn't been on a river that busy in a long time. Nearly everyone I saw was fishing with some version of a Euro rod, tight-lining without indicators.

I usually joke that I don't Euro nymph—I "American nymph" with a bobber and shot—but seeing everyone else doing it made me question whether I was out of touch with modern trout fishing. Fishing was tough, as it often is during midday in late July. We eventually pulled into a spot the local fly shop told us would be good and less crowded. I was pretty dejected by then, but I walked up to a run of big pocket water and told myself: "Dude, small black flies under an indicator with shot worked 20 years ago. They'll work now."

I rigged up a traditional nymph rig and promptly lost the whole thing on my first drift. I thought, "I suck. The only way to catch fish anymore must be Euro nymphing." But I fought off that thought, re-rigged with a shorter dropper and lighter weight, and flossed it through the rocks. WHAM! The indicator shot down, and I was into a fish. At first, I thought it must be a whitefish or sucker, but then it jumped—a beautiful 16–18" wild rainbow. I eventually brought it to the bank, took a few mental snapshots, and relished the moment. What worked 20 years ago still worked. I tucked in my flies and walked back to the trucks, only to find out I had landed the only fish of the day.


A valley smallmouth bass creek. Photo by Hogan Brown

The next few weeks, I rambled around in my dad's old ranch truck, revisiting "old haunts" near home—the places where I used to fish before boats with motors, front-facing sonar, and before I became obsessed with stripers. I returned to little valley creeks with graffiti-covered bridge pilings, chasing smallmouth bass I used to catch in college when I couldn't afford gas to get to a trout river. I pulled out an old fiberglass 4-weight and my wading boots, tossed them in the truck, and fished in the heat of the day. The smallmouth were still in the same spots, eating the same flies they had years ago.

Ultimately, I believe what I learned this summer is not to forget where you come from. Even if you feel like you've "evolved" to a higher level of fishing, the truth is you haven't left those roots behind. There's always something to learn from revisiting the places and techniques that got you started. Staying humble, finding joy in the small things, and realizing we are the sum of the steps in our journey—that's where the meaning lies.

So, before winter hits, go fishing at that old bass pond for bluegill, or toss some Velveeta cheese in to attract catfish. Maybe throw a Royal Wulff at hatchery trout in that campground where you first learned to fish. A few months ago, I would have said that was a waste of time, and that you should always push into new fisheries and techniques. But this summer taught me—well, forced me—to remember where I came from. And I'm glad it did.

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- David T., San Jose, CA

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